

A Model for Revitalizing Urban Churches That Have Experienced Decline

by

Chauncey P. Harrison

Date: 4/14/2021

Approved:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Emmanuel Goatley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley, Supervisor

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Dr. Will Willimon, 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

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This project seeks to introduce a model for revitalizing urban churches that have experienced decline (i.e., membership, money, and morale). Social Justice, Prophetic Preaching, Missional Stewardship, Intergenerational Ministry, and Progressive Pastoral Leadership functions as the central pillars of the project. My research has led me to engage the contributions of theologians, sociologists, social critics, activists, researchers, biblical scholars, homileticians, historians, politicians, church growth experts, political scientists, statisticians, community advocates, journalists, and civil rights leaders to explore the collaborative efforts that can be taken to revive black churches in impoverished communities in Urban America.

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Introduction

The following project is significant for the church, because it discloses the core challenges that have led to the decline of urban churches while seeking to provide a rubric for churches to rebound in the face of decline. The project bears an exceptional level of significance for me as a practitioner, because I pastor an urban church that has declined and am confident that if a feasible paradigm for church growth is implemented, it can thrive again. My thesis endeavors to argue that based on my research, experiences, and observations that social justice, prophetic preaching, missional stewardship, intergenerational ministry, and progressive pastoral leadership could potentially function as keys to revitalizing urban congregations that are experiencing decline. Although the five areas above are identified in this project to potentially revitalize declining churches, they simultaneously contain features of, or work in conjunction with traditional methods of church revitalization (i.e., evangelism, outreach, discipleship, & missions) which have been historically utilized to promote growth as well as address decline.

Many inner-city black churches are located in thriving cities that have multi-billion-dollar budgets while simultaneously having some of the highest rates of income inequality in the world.¹ Cities like Chicago, New York City, and Washington D.C. have thriving downtowns, while communities are plagued by record unemployment, poverty, gun violence, dilapidated housing, rampant homelessness, and underfunded schools just blocks from downtown.²

¹ Trevor Bach, U.S. News & World Report, "The 10 U.S. Cities with The Largest Income Inequality Gaps," 21 September. 2020

² Stuart Butler & Jonathan Grabinsky, Brookings, "Tackling the legacy of persistent urban inequality and concentrated poverty," 16 November. 2020

These communities suffer from a deficit of positive opportunities and a surplus of negative outlets. The negative outlets could be defined as coping mechanisms that provide temporary relief from the ongoing misery and trauma to which people resort to escape the adverse conditions of their realities. These communities have a surplus of negative outlets which include substance abuse, addiction, illicit sexual activities, and inauthentic religious expressions. I believe that people can turn to religion as a means to escape the current condition of their daily reality for a temporary segment of time; this notion mirrors Karl Marx's critique of religion as "the opium of the people."³ I believe the faith community can potentially serve as a catalyst of change that ushers in spiritual renewal, economic development, social uplift, civic engagement, and leadership development in the same disinvested communities in which they are located.

It is my hope that this project will reignite the passion of urban ministries throughout the world that they can use this model within the confines of their respective contexts to hope again, believe again, and grow again.

³ Karl Marx, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", 10 Feb. 1844

Social Justice

Social Justice encompasses fairly distributing wealth and opportunities for upward mobility and can be a potential means of revitalizing a congregation. Keisha McEntire defines social justice as “Justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. In a just society everyone would receive fair, equitable, and impartial treatment and have access to the same outcomes.”¹ This mode amplifies the underlying principles of the Gospel to address the dire lived experiences of the marginalized. John MacArthur states that, “A running theme in Luke’s Gospel is Jesus compassion for Gentiles, Samaritans, women, children, tax collectors, sinners, and other often regarded as outcasts in Israel.”² Jesus was committed to ministry among the poor, oppressed, brokenhearted, the sick, and the prisoner.³ The Lukan Jesus has a perpetual affinity for the marginalized (i.e., sinners, tax collectors, lepers, women, the sick, the poor, foreigners, widows, and adulterers).⁴ Barbara Williams-Skinner states: The church has a critical role to play in abating the appalling level of human suffering, especially in communities that are underserved. We should be like the Good Samaritan, who, despite not knowing the person in need, gave so much to bring about the healing of his neighbor.”⁵ Social Justice is the impetus that should ignite the church to put some hands, feet, and resources behind its theological beliefs about fairness, justice, and equality.

¹ Keshia McEntire, “The Church Should Be at the Forefront of the Fight for Social Justice”, *Relevant Magazine*, 2018

<https://relevantmagazine.com/current/the-church-should-be-at-the-forefront-of-the-fight-for-social-justice/>

² MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2005, 1265

³ Luke 4:18-19 (New King James Version)

⁴ Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995

⁵ Barbara Williams-Skinner, “How Churches Can Reframe Social Justice Now & After COVID”, *Religion News*, 2020 <https://religionnews.com/2020/05/07/how-churches-can-reframe-social-justice-now-and-after-covid-19/>

The church has to establish its footing in the community not as an adversary, but as an ally in the fight for its socio-economic viability. The church should not take a domineering role to improve the community by forcing its vision of community uplift on the residents. It should lead through listening to the aspirations, concerns, and inquiries of the community to be a trusted partner in the progress. Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller state, “When people ask, ‘How can I get involved?’ the church answers, ‘We want to know how can we get involved with you. What do you care about, or give yourself to, in this world? Can we share it with others? Are there ways others can be involved with you?’”⁶ The church should cultivate a relationship of active listening with the community to discern its role in furthering the community’s vision of transformation. Tatenhove and Mueller state, “When a church decides to partner with its neighborhood-allowing itself to listen and learn-the relationship has the potential to change both the congregation and the neighborhood.”⁷ The church and its leadership have to take the position of a student who actively listens to the reservations, recommendations of both key stakeholders and autonomous community residents.

The Black Church at its best has simultaneously functioned as the space for spiritual formation and as the platform for social justice. Raphael G. Warnock says, “Historically the faith of the black church has been shaped and characterized by two complementary yet competing sensibilities: revivalistic piety and radical protest.”⁸ It is this dual role of the black church that allowed it to both promote spiritual empowerment while challenging the policies, personalities, and prejudices that historically kept people of color

⁶ Tatenhove, Krin & Mueller, Rob, *Neighborhood Churches*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2019, 23

⁷ Tatenhove & Mueller, 51

⁸ Warnock, Raphael G. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, New York University Press, NYC, 13

socioeconomically subordinate in America. Ronald J. Sider states, “If Jesus regularly combined word and deed and then commanded his followers to do the same, biblical Christians dare not focus only on evangelism or only on social ministry.”⁹ The church should never take an “either/or” approach, as it relates to evangelism and social justice ministry. Both are essential for spiritual growth and community uplift.

Social Justice remains central in many black churches. Many of them have historically utilized their platform to fight for social justice, because their congregants do not retain the same level of access to the ladders of opportunity that whites readily access comparably. Henry Louis Gates Jr states that, "No pillar of the African American community has been more central to its history, identity, and social justice vision than the Black Church. In the centuries since its birth in the time of slavery, the Black Church has stood as the foundation of Black religious, political, economic, and social life."¹⁰ Ideally, the Black Church at its best never separated the spiritual from the social. It has taken a holistic approach.

Sider states, “The holistic church teaches a ministry vision that integrates discipleship, evangelism, and social action, and works toward both spiritual and social transformation. It supports social action that includes charity, compassion, community development, public policy, and social advocacy, addressing both the individual and systemic sources of human problems.”¹¹ This holistic trajectory does not call the church to be politically partisan by endorsing a particular candidate or aligning itself with a particular

⁹ Sider, Olson, & Unruh. *Churches That Make A Difference*, Baker Publishers, Grand Rapids, 2002, 46

¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates Jr, Time Magazine, "To Understand Black America, You Need to Understand the Black Church", 17 Feb. 2021

¹¹ Sider, Olson, & Unruh, 16

political party, but it does call the church to challenge public policies that have led to the detriment of the black community.

We should also be mindful that the political sphere influences our everyday lives and especially the vulnerable population, that we have been commissioned by the Gospel to serve. Sider states, “Understanding the power of politics helps us see more clearly how we can also improve people’s lives by reforming unfair laws and socioeconomic structures.”¹² Clergy and congregations that are located in disadvantaged communities need to understand and teach how the political process can be engaged to improve the plights of their constituents while taking a bold stand in the event that certain policies adversely impact the community

The book *Churches That Make A Difference* seeks to define the meaning, visible manifestations of holistic ministry while describing the foundational ingredients of holistic ministry. It also provides a framework for crafting a visionary blueprint for holistic ministry in one’s respective ministry context. Sider states, “If God’s people do not become informed and involved out of love for the community, they leave political and economic decisions to people who do not have the community’s best interest at heart.”¹³ Although Sider offers a credible model for holistic ministry, which is universal in its orientation, black pastoral leaders do not have to reinvent the wheel outside of their cultural context to get the results that Sider’s model endeavors to achieve. The Black Church has witnessed our very own social justice-oriented pastors (e.g., Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson, he established social justice initiatives and global humanitarian efforts to promote social

¹² Sider, Olson, & Unruh, 94

¹³ Sider, Olson, & Unruh, 95

good¹⁴) proclaim and produce the results that Sider's model seeks to achieve. It is the essential role of the church to inform its congregants on how the political process works, but especially how the political process can work for their communal betterment. It is the church's role to represent the best interests of the community in partnership with the community when lobbyists, developers, and corporations place profits of their stakeholders above the interests of the community.

Marvin McMickle states that, "There is a place for people of religious faith, including clergy, in the political process, to make sure that politics works to care for the least of these and not just for the richest and wealthiest among us."¹⁵ The church at its best serves as the home of the homeless, the hope for the hopeless, and the voice for the voiceless. Our faith in Christ serves as the fuel which drives our fight for the least, lost, and left-out in society. John J. Collins states, "The laws about the remission of debt and the release of slaves underline of the prominent features of Deuteronomy-humanitarian concern for the poor and the marginalized. Deuteronomy 24 contains provisions protecting the rights of poor wage earners, aliens, and orphans. Some of them are already found in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus, but they are more developed in Deuteronomy."¹⁶ The Deuteronomist continually voiced God's concern and our moral obligation to care for the widow, orphan, stranger, and the poor¹⁷ which was applicable then and today.¹⁸

Pursuing social justice could function as a central method of reversing decline in urban churches when unchurched people see the church showing a vested interest in

¹⁴ Richardson, W. Franklyn. *Witness of Grace*, The Church Online, Pittsburgh, 2020

¹⁵ McMickle, Marvin A. *Pulpit & Politics*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 2014, 21

¹⁶ Collins, John J. *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2004, 165-166

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 10:18-19 (New King James Version)

¹⁸ Richard D. Patterson, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, "The Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature," July 1973, 223-34

meeting the felt needs of individuals who will never step through the corridors of a church. Engaging in the fight for social justice could position the church to be a pivotal ally for non-religious, governmental, and non-profit organizations that are working to end poverty, expand employment, fight human trafficking, expand after school programs, increase mental health funding, and eradicate violence in communities that are plagued by crime. Social Justice is potentially a way for the black church to innovatively answer and address the “how” of the Great Commission.¹⁹ In Jesus’ closing words to his disciples, he told them to preach the Gospel, make disciples, baptize, and to teach. He tells them the who, what, when, and where, but he never tells them “how” to implement to totality of the commission. This is the church’s invitation to innovation. Making disciples does not merely entail preaching, teaching, and baptizing, it can also entail engaging in social justice, which serves as another tool for the church to meet the spiritual and social needs of the disciple. We can transform the trajectory of the black church when we demonstrate that we are equally committed to the spirit, body, and soul of both the disciple and the unchurched.

The declining influence of the black church in the overall lives of black people did not start in the 2000’s. Social scientists have traced its decline all the way back to World War II, which has cumulatively been attributed to industrialization, secularization, and urbanization. Curtis J. Evans says that, “Arthur Huff Fauset, St. Claire Drake, and Horace Cayton, and other black social scientists, however indicated in their studies that during World War II, religion was no longer taken for granted in black communities and black churches had to compete (often unsuccessfully) with secular organizations for the attention, time, and devotion of African Americans.”²⁰ The black church no longer has the paramount

¹⁹ Matthew 28:18-20 (New King James Version)

²⁰ Evans, Curtis J. *The Burden of Black Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, 253

status and influence that it had within the black community of old, but that status could be regained. One of the key ways of regaining that influence is not merely by being committed to spiritual empowerment, but by being equally committed to advocating for safe communities, properly funding schools, broadening job opportunities, increasing access to healthcare, and improving the quality of life in the blighted neighborhoods in which those churches are located.

One of the first steps to productively partaking in the fight for social justice within blighted communities is by identifying with the struggle of the urban poor and the unique struggle of black people. Michael Eric Dyson speaks of hustling as a mode of using one's gifts, talents, and abilities to produce economic gain. Dyson's overall objective is both to disclose and to define the reality of hustling in the black experience in America, due to the economic, educational, and employment opportunities for mobility that are readily accessible to white Americans not being readily accessible for black Americans. As he speaks to the trajectory of successful black men, Dyson summarizes that, "The best way out of the ghetto is to use God-given talent and heroic hustle to relentlessly fight the inequality that holds back so many black folk."²¹ The black church has to understand the day-to-day struggle of these communities while appreciating the way they maximize their hustle to provide for themselves and their families.

Social Justice can potentially function as the new evangelism in blighted communities that distrust organized religious institutions. Kevin may not come to church for worship, but he would likely come for a job fair. Tasha may not bring her kids to church

²¹ Dyson, Michael Eric. *Jay-Z: Made in America*, St. Martin's Press, New York City, 36

for Sunday School during the winter, but she would likely bring them for school supplies during the summer.

Efforts of meeting various but critical needs of community residents through social justice among the unchurched within these communities could help the church to minister relevantly among people in which injustice is invasive. Martin Luther King Jr. aptly stated, “The church must seek to transform both individual lives and the social situation that brings too many people anguish of spirit and cruel bondage.”²²

One of the keys features of being an impactful black church in the inner-city is by focusing on the spiritual and social conditions of the congregants and the community. They should not be mutually exclusive; they should not compel us to do “either/or” but they should inspire us to do “both/and”. One salient characteristic of major cities in America is that they each have bustling downtowns and dilapidated ghettos. Those ghettos have similar core social issues whether in Chicago, Atlanta, Baltimore, or Philadelphia. Those vicious social issues include poverty, unemployment, underfunded schools, gun violence, and healthcare disparities. The church can use its spiritual platform within society to address the social issues of the community which are related to breakdowns in the social order. The church cannot just focus on spiritual empowerment, it must also fight to properly fund schools, reduce poverty, increase employment, promote health/wellness, and to expand access to core municipal services within the community.

Many congregations are made up of a majority of parishioners who do not live in the community. This should not become a reality that we embrace. It must be a problem that we resolve. Engaging in social justice efforts could potentially compel community

²² King Jr., Martin Luther. *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1977, 138

residents who are not churchgoers to visit and likely join. These efforts could also function as a way for the black church to repair its image and reclaim its impact in the black community. When we make the priorities of the community our priorities as the church then we can engage in the progressive work of bridging the gap between the church/culture and the soul/social.

Sasha Abramsky states that, “Ensuring that the democratic aspiration of mobility and opportunity for all becomes a reality once more should, I believe, be one of twenty-first-century America’s top political and moral priorities.”²³ People who live in impoverished communities want quality education, accessible employment, reliable healthcare, home ownership, and a secure retirement, similar to other communities in America. Social Justice would allow the church to counter the pejorative narrative that black/brown people in blighted urban communities do not value education, industry, or morality. Poverty is caused by injustice, disinvestment, racism, and oppressive socio-economic structures. Conn and Ortiz state, “It is much easier to blame the poor for being poor than to understand that we benefit from the very social, political, and economic powers that are oppressing others and making them poor.”²⁴ In order for the black church to be successful in advocating for social justice, it must be a leader in the conversation about defining poverty, disclosing the causes of poverty, and implementing solutions to eradicate poverty.

Oftentimes society, government, and the community dance around the underlying issue of social ills in urban centers, which is poverty. Poverty does not merely speak to the absence of food, shelter, or basic necessities. The root of poverty speaks of powerlessness,

²³ Abramsky, Sasha. *The American Way of Poverty*, Nation Books, New York City, 2013, 284

²⁴ Conn, Harvie & Ortiz, Manuel. *Urban Ministry*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2001, 327

the lack of capacity to change one's plight. Conn and Ortiz states, "This leads to a real poverty of identity, hopelessness, and a sense of total failure and inferiority."²⁵ These ultimate deficits of identity, hope, and esteem are seen in the astronomical levels of gun violence, crime, assaults, substance abuse, and mental health disparities in disadvantaged communities.²⁶

This reality opens the door of opportunity for the church to have a positive impact to combat the causes and concomitants of poverty. The church can potentially instill in the impoverished that they are created in the image of God and despite their socio-economic station, they have been created for a purpose to use their gifts, talents, and abilities to make a productive contribution to society. When the church can plant the seed of hope and potential while simultaneously connecting the impoverished with resources, opportunities to improve their plight, ultimately the harvest of their dreams and aspirations will blossom. This gives the church the opportunity to build a relationship of solidarity with the community so that the community knows that the church is not its adversary, but its ally.

The church cannot remedy all the ills which plague blighted communities in urban America. The continual engagement of the church with key stakeholders to address the socio-economic challenges of impoverished communities, demonstrates, however that the church is determined to contribute solutions to the problems. The church cannot do everything, but the church can do something to positively impact the community, especially blighted communities that are an intergenerational phenomenon whose history represents those who live there and those who have moved from there to thrive elsewhere. Mitchell Duneier states, "One thing that makes the U.S. ghetto different in kind from other

²⁵ Conn & Ortiz, 326

²⁶ Charles M. Blow, The New York Times, "Destructive Power of Death," 31 May. 2020

neighborhoods is that it is an intergenerational expression of a series of vicious cycles within the realms of education, work, family life, violence, and local politics; all are feeding on one another. The cumulative impact of such self-perpetuating vicious cycles makes the ghetto a place in which too many things have gone wrong for a simple fix-the-kind of fix so often deemed possible by misguided reformers”²⁷ The combined issues within blighted inner city communities feed on each other and cannot be addressed with a quick fix solution in one generation. This is a reality that is not exclusive to black ghettos; it is also true for other impoverished non-black communities in urban, rural, and suburban America. Although it is hard to determine the catalyst of urban ills whether it is poverty, racism, or inequality, they collectively serve as the breeding ground for underfunded schools, health disparities, crime, violence, and mental trauma.

These compounding, intergenerational social ills should inspire the church to partner with key community, governmental, and philanthropic stakeholders to provide key goods, services, and resources to make these communities economically sustainable and socially viable. These partnerships hinge on relationships with anchor institutions within the community. Tatenhove and Mueller define anchor institutions as, “enterprises like universities and hospitals, are rooted in their local communities by mission, invested capital, or relationships to customers, employers, and vendors. Because of their influence, they have the potential to bring crucial and measurable benefits to citizens of all ages.”²⁸ The church cannot be the “lone ranger” in its efforts to revitalize the community through social justice. Partnerships should be established between other anchor institutions within the community to give the church greater leverage in bringing about social change it wants

²⁷ Duneier, Mitchell. *Ghetto*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York City, 2016, 227

²⁸ Tatenhove & Mueller, 120

to see through pooling resources, exchanging ideas, and sharing information through viable partnerships.

The church can also collaborate with other movements and initiatives within its respective municipality to take actionable steps to augment social justice. These actionable steps of social justice could include the church supporting local efforts to raise the minimum wage, implement paid sick leave, increase the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), make community college free, expand access to healthcare, properly fund public schools, ensure women receive equal pay for equal work, promote criminal justice reform, and make homeownership accessible.

The Black Church cannot make a seismic impact in disadvantaged communities if it envisions serving as just another charity in the neighborhood. The Catholic social activist, Dorothy Day shared the same sentiment in her critique of the Catholic Church. Although she believed the church did a good job in providing charity, it failed in its obligation to combat the social order which made charity necessary.²⁹ It is important that the church have a multi-faceted vision of meeting the needs of the community, not merely by giving them handouts to survive, but as “hand-ups” to thrive, not by merely addressing the symptoms but by attacking the system which have led to the social ills. Giving out free school supplies, food, hygienic products, immunizations, and clothes is not enough. Blighted communities are inundated by charities. Multiple residents in the impoverished community where my church is located have expressed to me that the real need is for the church to position itself to become an economic incubator that provides residents with the

²⁹ Day, Dorothy. *The Long Loneliness*, Harper & Row, New York City, 1952, 110

necessary resources to alter the trajectory of their lives. Therefore, the social ministries that the church offers the community must be multi-tiered in size and scope.

Sider states that, “Social ministries fall into four basic categories: relief (directly supplying food, clothing, or housing to someone in urgent need), individual development (transformational ministries that empower a person to improve physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or social status), community development (renews the healthy building block of community, such as housing, jobs, healthcare, and education), and structural change (transforming unfair political, economic, environmental, or cultural institutions and systems).”³⁰ The social ministries of the church cannot merely give hungry people fish, they also need to teach people how to fish, provide them with fishing equipment, and ensure that everyone has access to the pond. The church will miss out on its unique impact to transform disadvantaged communities if it has a myopic view of outreach which merely give out donations without guiding people to independence, entrepreneurship and changing the socio-economic structures that keep them in the underclass. While every church does not have the bandwidth to implement systemic change, churches could do an internal assessment to determine where they are on the social ministry spectrum and then learn how they could potentially improve or partner with a neighboring organization to further the social ministry they cannot do independently.

Public Works is potentially another area that the black church could emphasize to champion social justice, considering that quality of life deficiencies are intertwined with the social ills that plagues blighted inner-city communities.³¹ The disadvantaged inner-city

³⁰ Sider, Olson, & Unruh, 86

³¹ Jake Nyberg, Western City, "City of Escondido develops innovative and collaborative program to eliminate graffiti," 1 Feb. 2021

communities where our churches are located experience every social ill imaginable. This diminishes the quality of life of its residents. Making public works a priority could potentially serve as a gateway for the church to engage the local government and the respective 311 call centers to ensure that residents have access to essential municipal services in their neighborhood. Those services include filling potholes, removing graffiti, towing abandoned vehicles, securing abandoned buildings, rodent abatement, inlet cleaning, relighting street lights, tree trimming, and addressing illegal trash dumping. These measures ensure that residents in these communities have access to basic city services and allow the actions of the church to speak louder than its words. That inaudible message is that residents in disadvantaged communities should have the same level of access to city services that those who live in affluent communities enjoy. Both groups live in the same city, pay the same taxes, patronize the same business, and subsequently deserve the same level of access.

Public Works could potentially serve as a key to the black church using its platform to advocate for local governments to mandate that minority contractors have a sizable percentage of the infrastructure contracts that the municipality distributes to resurface roads, build bridges, modernize sewer systems, construct hospitals/schools/airports, and expand Broadband Internet. These actionable efforts would decrease unemployment, increase the residents buying power, and expand the tax base of disadvantaged communities that have been disinvested in for decades.

Engaging in the fight for social justice could allow the black church to become the center for spiritual enrichment, social uplift, and economic empowerment in the black community. Our churches will experience growth when the communities in which they are

located know that it is as committed to justice and jobs as it is committed to Jesus. This model of ministry will be mandatory in communities of color which were adversely affected by the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic. The black church must demonstrate a commitment to be the incubator of social justice considering both the death toll and economic catastrophe that the virus brought in communities of color. It will be imperative that the church take an active role to bring hope, healing to a nation that has lost nearly 400,000 lives and had approximately 25,000,000 infected so far.³² The role of the church will be augmented after stay-at-home orders are lifted because it will be at that moment that the entirety of the adverse effects (i.e., lost lives, businesses, jobs, healthcare, and housing) will be realized in our communities.

Malcolm X was believed to have said that, “When America gets a cold, black folk gets the flu”. The post-pandemic era could be flu season in the black community because after stay-at-home-orders are lifted, state, municipal budget deficits will have to be addressed and if states and municipalities do not attain federal relief, they will have to resort to cutting services, raising taxes, and job cuts to close their budget gaps³³, which will subsequently have an adverse effect on black people. The church should amplify its voice to speak truth to power to challenge the powers that be to ensure essential goods, services, and resources are preserved and expanded to ensure that our communities can recover, prosper, and secure the American dream.

This season marks a crucial opportunity for the black church to activate its faith, fight for justice, uplift the vulnerable, speak truth to power, champion equality, and break

³² Will Stone, NPR, "As Death Rate Accelerates, U.S. Records 400,000 Lives Lost to the Coronavirus,"19 Jan.2021

³³ Patrick Sisson, Bloomberg City Lab, "With No Federal Help Coming, Cities Cling to the Financial Cliff,"18 Dec.2020

down racial, economic, social, political, and geographical barriers to ensure that our communities can rebuilt, recover, and rebound. Joseph Blenkinsopp states that, “Amos is much less concerned than Hosea with forms of worship and much more concerned to excoriate what he takes to be an oppressive and exploitative sociopolitical setup. In doing so he itemizes: selling into slavery for trivial debts, excessive fines, falsifying weights and measures, dishonest trade practices, corrupting the legal process, and so on.”³⁴ Now is the time for the church to fight for what justice should look like in our communities and in our world, the justice that the Hebrew Canonical Prophet Amos described as “rolling down like water, righteousness like a mighty stream.”³⁵ Arthur E. Holt states, “The church is probably the greatest single agent in binding up the wounds of a suffering humanity and it ought to be willing to pay the price of an accurate knowledge of the methods of kindness which it seeks to use.”³⁶ The church has a unique opportunity to redeem its standing within the world by using its platform to promote social good. Efforts of promoting social good on the part of the church should be fighting for justice for all people regardless of age, race, sex, gender, class, religion, or origin.

Conn & Ortiz define justice as, “Offering the opportunity for all people to hear how much God loves them through Jesus. Justice means sharing our resources so that parents need not helplessly watch their children die. Justice means loving our neighbors-near and far-at the same level of quality and care with which we love ourselves. It also involves thousands of little acts accumulating into processes and systems and relationships that are

³⁴ Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1983, 81

³⁵ Amos 5:24 (New King James Version)

³⁶ Arthur E. Holt, “Social Justice and the Present Duty of the Church”, *The Biblical World*, Mar 1920, vol.54, no.2, 138

felt by the participants to be right and fair.”³⁷ When the church reclaims its position to ensure that justice is the norm within disadvantaged inner-city communities then it will be positioned to reach residents within the community who are not followers of Christ. It is then and only then that the black church can model Jesus vision of the *city on a hill*, Martin Luther King’s vision of the *beloved community*, and progressively become an optical demonstration of the help, healing, and hope of the world.

³⁷ Conn & Ortiz, 334

Prophetic Preaching

Preaching is significant in the black church. It is for some parishioners, the zenith of the overall worship experience. It functions as the weekly divine message given by the preacher to feed/foster the congregation for the week to come. Samuel D. Proctor describes preaching the following way, “It is the highest of all callings because it gathers us all from our vocational and professional assignments, our national and racial diversities, our economic and social gradations, and asks us to turn and face the God of all creation, and to reconcile our lives to this one Wholly Other.”¹

Preaching has a distinct way of collectively summoning the attention of its audience, despite their divergent backgrounds. The call to worship, opening prayer, scripture, hymn, announcements, greeting, congregational prayer, sacraments, and musical selections are important portions of the service, but the sermon as William Willimon states is, “a venture that begins in the preacher’s study and then is recapitulated in the pulpit.”²

The sermon plays a central role in the black church because it represents a week-long experience of contemplation, meditation, study, and prayer on the part of the preacher to succinctly hear and subsequently deliver the set message for the congregation for that specific time and place. The prophet in ancient Israel served as an intermediary (between God/humankind, God/the king, God/the nation). Their roles varied based upon their tradition, and progressively the unique features of the various prophetic traditions began to contain resemblances of each other.³ McMickle states that the prophetic preacher must be,

¹ Proctor, Samuel D. *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 1984, 22

² Willimon, William. *Leading Through Preaching*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2020, 139

³ Wilson, Robert R. *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1980

“faithful to and worthy of following in the footsteps of Samuel who confronted Saul (told him God rejected his kingship), Nathan who confronted David (revealed to him that would be punished by God for killing Uriah), Amos who condemned Jeroboam (called the king to become loyal to God and to address social injustices), Jeremiah who challenged Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (informed the kings that the Babylonian Captivity was an inevitable punishment for Judah sins), and John the Baptist who did not grow mute or meek in the presence of Herod Antipas (reminded the king that it was unlawful that he married his sister-in-law).”⁴ The message could be received, reviewed, or rejected, but that is not the responsibility of the prophet. The fundamental responsibility of the prophet in this regard is to serve as the mouthpiece of the divine which amplifies the divine word that is to be conveyed to God’s people. This is a sacred task to perform on a daily basis. This is why God sovereignly assigned this task to the preacher. God assigned the message of proclamation to the individual called to be the spiritual leader of the congregation. This task of preaching cannot be taken lightly because of the life-changing ramifications of the word of God which has the ability to save souls, deliver individuals from bondage, heal the broken of their respective sicknesses. It also promote the spiritual formation of the born-again believer, and potentially serve as the catalyst which ignites the listeners to fight for justice, equality, and brotherhood in a world plagued by injustice, inequality, and division.

Preaching retains a central role in both the black church and worship experience because amongst other things black preaching is unique in its context, considering it is intertwined with the lived-experiences of black people in America. William B. McClain

⁴ McMickle, Marvin A. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2006, 10

highlights that black preaching, focuses on the central text, contains a prophetic emphasis, literary devices, pulpit-to-pew interaction, and contains a message that inspires the listener to action while speaking to their lived experiences.”⁵ James Earl Massey suggests that black preaching is, “Functional (contains a means to an end), Festive (deals with concrete life while containing an invitation of joy in the midst of sorrow), Communal (aids the sense of group life), Radical (confronts hearers in the depths of their beings with the issues of life), and Climatic (it seeks some type of celebratory close).”⁶ Massey’s description highlights that black preaching is purposive, uplifting, relevant, direct, and exhortation-oriented. Henry Mitchell lists, “Intonation/Whooping (chanting or sing-song style of delivery), spontaneity (ability to respond to the movement of the spirit among the preacher/congregation), and sermon structure (imaginative, narrative, and prone to generate an experiential encounter).”⁷ Mitchell’s description gets to the rudimentary distinctives of black preaching. The climax is inundated by voice intonations of the preacher accompanied by music, the preacher at times “goes off the script” at the point of inspiration by the spirit, and the sermon structure is multi-faceted.

The last three characteristics of black preaching (i.e., call-and-response, whooping, a combination of storytelling/poetry/oratory) are compelling attributes in black preaching and are at times utilized in prophetic preaching, but they are not the only unique features of black preaching and the absence of them are readily seen in the preaching of both past and present black preachers. Black Preaching can also feature aspects of Expository

⁵ McClain, William B. “African American Preaching” *The Renewal of Sunday Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber,

StarSong, Nashville, 1993, 316

⁶ Massey, James Earl. *The Responsible Pulpit*, Warner Press, Indiana, 1974, 101

⁷ Mitchell, Henry. *Black Preaching*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990, 108

Preaching (i.e., processing the text for original meaning and then principlizing the text for current applicability)⁸ and Prophetic Preaching (i.e., voicing God’s passion for those who suffer, proclaiming a vision of hope, a clear alternative for the future, and pointing the way forward, providing practical wisdom about how, in fact, the community can proceed).⁹

Black Preaching is not merely unique because of its style, inspiration, or engagement, but because it can potential foster spiritual formation and social action. It can potentially lead to the spiritual growth of listeners as they apply the principles of the sermon concerning faith, love, and hope into their daily lived experiences. The application of the principles of the sermon also has the ability to generate social action when it has kindled a fire within the hearer to implement God’s vision of justice, equality, and brotherhood in spaces that are inundated by injustice, inequality, and division.

Black Preaching’s combined potential to simultaneously foster spiritual formation and social action are the keys to its unique ability to lead to growth in urban congregations that have experienced decline. As Donald J. Hilliard, Jr. states, church growth could range from being spiritual, numerical, financial, and/or social. Modern day definitions of growth within faith communities can be shortsighted. Too often growth is measured by buildings, budgets, and bodies.¹⁰ I would not totally dismiss those metrics, but one must also recognize that some churches have experienced growth beyond the limited perimeters of the metrics listed above. Impactful preaching will not guarantee that your respective ministry will have a twenty thousand square feet facility, a multi-million-dollar annual

⁸ MacArthur, John. *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1992, 16

⁹ Greiser, David B. & King, Michael A. *Anabaptist Preaching*, Cascadia Publishing House, Telford, 2003, 76-93

¹⁰ Hilliard, Donald J. *Church Growth from an African American Perspective*, Valley Forge, 2006, 2-3

budget, or welcome two thousand people for worship per weekend. The type of growth that I am referring to is not solely measured based on infrastructure, income, and influx. The growth that preaching can potentially bring is through the metric of impact. That impact could potentially be economic, political, developmental, and social impact in the blighted communities in which that church is located.

Defining Prophetic Preaching

The preaching that can potentially lead to the multi-faceted growth listed above is not merely black preaching, it is prophetic preaching. Black Preaching is not inherently prophetic, but black preaching at its best is prophetic in both its context and content. Defining and highlighting the key features of prophetic preaching are crucial in conceptualizing its potential to inspire spiritual formation, social uplift, and societal change.

John S. McClure defines prophetic preaching as “an imaginative reappropriation of traditional narratives and symbols for the purpose of critiquing dangerous and unjust present situations and providing an alternative vision of God’s future.”¹¹ McClure’s definition highlights that prophetic preaching challenges the listener to reimagine traditional norms to critique the injustices of the present while augmenting a promising alternative that will eradicate the highlighted injustice. Hilliard states, “Prophetic Preaching is true to the spirit and meaning of the biblical text while at the same time speaking relevantly and redemptively to the issues, challenges, promises, and

¹¹ McClure, John S. *Preaching Words*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2007, 117

circumstances of daily life.”¹² Hilliard’s definition highlights that prophetic preaching does not merely explain and exegete the text; it also speaks to the lived experiences and the day-to-day promise and perils of the audience. Walter Brueggemann defines the mission of prophetic ministry by stating that, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”¹³ Brueggemann’s definition reveals that prophetic *ministry* although distinct from prophetic *preaching* creates a consciousness that is alternative to the current reality which offers a promising change in the current society once the new alternative vision is both iteratively and ultimately implemented. Prophetic Preaching can potentially function as the vehicle that ushers in the consciousness that prophetic ministry produces.

The infinite possibilities of prophetic preaching are promising because this type of preaching does not merely criticize a problem, it offers an alternative reality, and a solution in light of the divine standard of justice, equality, and kinship for all people. Prophetic Preaching does not merely state what it is against, it also discloses the reasoning and ramifications of the positive alternative of the current reality. This mode of preaching is not content with the status quo of reality, like vision, it does not accept the current coordination of reality as a done deal. It pushes for a new vision, new possibilities, and new horizons in the face of current conditions that have been embraced by the dominant culture.

¹² Hilliard, Donald. *Church Growth from an African American Perspective*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 2006, 66

¹³ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978, 15

It is this type of preaching which pushes the envelope, disturbs preestablished norms, and challenges the systems/powers that be which can serve as a catalyst for transformation in blighted communities in our inner-cities. This type of preaching is one of the black church's greatest assets in combating racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, poverty, unemployment, neighborhood disinvestment, and healthcare disparities. McMickle advocates so ardently for prophetic preaching because it has historically functioned as the fuel behind the fire of change in the black church and community.¹⁴ Hilliard states, "It is one thing to know the Word of God; it is quite another to understand how to apply that Word to the situations we face every day. Prophetic Preaching addresses both dimensions."¹⁵ This mode of preaching utilizes the pulpit as more than a pulpit, but as a pivotal platform to bring God's vision of justice into fruition even in the face of a present reality which is not reflective of that vision. When preaching (prophetic preaching) strikes the chord within the congregation it then has a greater chance of engaging the community and mobilizing both groups to challenge key socio-political systems and stakeholders in order to implement the change that these communities so desperately need to recover, rebuild, and rebound, to ultimately become self-sustaining.¹⁶

Describing Prophetic Preaching

Certain fundamental elements make a sermon prophetic. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale asserts, "Prophetic Preaching is rooted in the biblical witness, is countercultural and challenges the status quo, is concerned with the evils and shortcoming of the present order,

¹⁴ McMickle, Marvin A. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*

¹⁵ Hilliard, Donald. *Church Growth from an African American Perspective*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 2006, 66

¹⁶ Schade, Leah D. *Preaching in The Purple Zone*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland, 2019

requires the preacher to name both what is not of God in the world and the new reality God will bring, offers hope of a new day to come, incites courage in its hearers and empowers them to work to change the social order, and requires of the preacher a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart."¹⁷ Whereas the definitions of prophetic preaching are nuanced, the basic foundations of prophetic preaching are included in those descriptions. Scripture is the foundation of prophetic witness, and we see this in the role of prophetic witness demonstrated in the writings of the Hebrew Canonical Prophets and even in the ministry of the Lukan Jesus. This preaching also challenges the current conditions that have been accepted within society and it combats evil systems and structures within society.

Prophetic preaching does not merely identify the current problems within society, it also promotes a new alternative reality that God desires. McMickle states that, "Prophetic preaching stirs up the courage within people to care about and then act to change the historical circumstances that work to prevent justice and righteousness."¹⁸ Although the current conditions of society leave the world at times inundated with darkness, prophetic preaching projects a ray of hope that a new tomorrow is on the horizon. Lastly, it empowers the listener to take the principles of the message and convert them into action, which brings about the vision of justice. The preacher is the mouthpiece of the divine, but they are also a member of a community that goes to God and the scripture on behalf of.¹⁹ The mouthpiece is mandated to have the same heart that God has for the marginalized,

¹⁷ Tisdale, Leonora Tubbs. *Prophetic Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, 10

¹⁸ McMickle, 121

¹⁹ Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2005, 101

oppressed, and impoverished. Tisdale's hallmarks of prophetic preaching further adjudicate why this mode of preaching has the potential to be so impactful.

Humility must not be overlooked or undervalued in prophetic preaching. McMickle states that, "Prophetic preaching also requires a large amount of humility and the awareness that the sins we see in the people who hear the sermons are also alive and at work in the people who preach the sermons."²⁰ The preacher as the proclaimer of the prophetic sermon has to speak from a place of humility, because the same sins that they preach against abide within their own being. Reaching the rich and winning the wealthy through prophetic preaching mandates that the preacher also see the proverbial oppressors as brothers and sisters within the network of the human family. Prophetic Preaching attacks the injustices without assaulting the humanity of all people, including the individuals that the message is leveled against. The preacher has to model and even teach the listening audience to see the oppressor through the lens of the *Imago Dei*, or the image of God. You cannot advocate for the oppressed, while hating the oppressor. Hate, resentment, and bitterness will never produce justice, equality, and kinship for the cause of the marginalized. The movement for justice has done a grave disservice when the supposed agents, activists, and advocates of justice harbor deep-seated hatred towards the perpetrators of injustice. The model, ministry, and message of Jesus taught that hatred never wins, but love never loses.

Cornel West aptly states that the mission of prophetic witness is, "Casting the light of truth on deliberate ignorance, exposing societal blindness regarding human suffering, and equipping people with the courage to care and the will to take actions that will change

²⁰ McMickle, 19

our lives and our historical circumstances.”²¹ Not only is prophetic preaching rooted in scripture, it counters the normal orders of things, identifies the major societal issues, but it also offers a promising vision of a new tomorrow in which individuals are empowered to put their faith, hands, feet, vote, and resources behind the message that they heard.

Liberation is also a key factor of Prophetic Preaching. Jerry Taylor states that, “The black church must maintain its inherited legacy of the Old Testament as a liberating influence with a divine agenda if it is to once again function as a liberating institution within unjust human systems that still seeks to enslave.”²² The church must reemphasize its mission to fight all systems, stakeholders, and structures which infringe on the liberation of all people. Taylor acknowledges that liberation must not merely be a theme, initiative, or activity. It must be represented in the core of the church mission and vision and illuminated in the programs, projects, and procedures of the church. Liberation must be luminous in every budget the church passes, service the church hold, event that the church sponsors, and initiative that the church champions. When the church reclaims its position as a faith-based, justice oriented, liberating institution it will then be able to use its moral authority, community endorsement, and strategic partnerships to transform blighted communities for the good of humanity and the glory of God

Deterrents to Prophetic Preaching

If prophetic preaching has seismic possibilities in speaking truth to power, empowering the marginalized, and mobilizing coalitions to promote social justice, why is

²¹ West, Cornel. *Democracy Matters*, Penguin Press, New York City, 2004, 115

²² Taylor, Jerry. “The Roots of the Black Prophetic Voice”, *Christianity Today*, Sept 2020, Vol. 64, No.6, 58.

it absent in so many pulpits today? McMickle states that a number of factors have led to the decline of prophetic preaching in the African American tradition. McMickle lists the factors that have led to the decline of prophetic preaching as, “an overzealous preoccupation with the place of praise, a false and narrow view of patriotism, and a focus in preaching on personal enrichment themes or a prosperity Gospel.”²³ Praising God through songs, music, instruments, and celebration at sermon ending of sermons have become a priority above prophetic preaching. This mode of thinking shines the light on the ongoing discussion concerning the role of celebration in preaching between Frank A. Thomas and Cleophus LaRue. Thomas believes that celebration plays a pivotal role in preaching and represents a unique mode by which people are able to experience the Gospel, according to Thomas celebration is not the aim but it is an invaluable asset in preaching.²⁴ Cleophus J. LaRue argues that preachers should not focus so much on celebration at the end of the sermon, but on providing substantive content throughout the sermon to promote the spiritual enrichment of the hearer.²⁵ This speaks to the fact that many of the preachers and parishioners are overly focused on “getting their praise on” within the four walls, while not having an equal passion for social justice and community uplift outside the four walls. It should not become a choice of “either/or” it should become an incorporation of “both/and”. The church should be a place where one can partake in individual and corporate praise to God for the blessings that God has bestowed. It should also be a sacred space where one is inspired to take up the cause of the least, lost, and left-out within society.

²³ Tisdale, 1

²⁴ Thomas, Frank A. *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2013

²⁵ LaRue, Cleophus J. *Rethinking Celebration*, Westminster John Knox Press, Nashville, 2016

As a black man who happens to be a clergy and military servicemen, I can understand how a jaded conceptualization of patriotism can be a deterrent to prophetic preaching. The problem is not patriotism in itself, because patriotism expresses love of the central values, principles, and culture of one's respective country. The problem is when nationalism is cloaked as patriotism. When I refer to nationalism, I am not referring to what Rich Lowry defines as "something that flows from people's natural devotion to their home and to their country"²⁶ or Yoram Hazony definition of nationalism which affirms that, "the world is governed best when nations agree to cultivate their own traditions, free from interference by other nations."²⁷ When I speak of nationalism, I am referring to a modern understanding of nationalism driven by political conservatism, which embodies unabashed commendation of one's country without room for critique or criticism. Critique is seen as a sign of disloyalty and not as a sign of healthy dialogue which should lead to further progress, programs, and projects to improve the country that one loves. Preachers who fear that critiquing the country is unpatriotic would steer clear of prophetic preaching. They would also be inclined to avoid this method of proclamation, because it could readily be seen as preaching politics, race baiting, vilifying prosperity, or lambasting the government. This narrow view of prophetic preaching misses the point that you can simultaneously show love for country while commending what it does right, while condemning what it does wrong, not to ultimately condemn the country, but to push the systems and stakeholders that control it to ensure that it lives up to its ideals.

²⁶ Lowry, Rich. *The Case for Nationalism*, Broadside Books, Northampton, 2019

²⁷ Hazony, Yoram. *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Basic Books, New York, 2018

J. Matthew Wilson defines prosperity theology as, “a religious belief amongst Protestant Christians that financial blessings and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one’s material wealth.”²⁸ This theology states that the amount of one’s material wealth, physical health, and societal influence is a direct indicator of how close one is to God. The problem with this theology according to McMickle is that it is all about self-enrichment, not community uplift, spiritual introspection, personal repentance, economic empowerment, or social action. This theology is antithetical to the central tenets of prophetic preaching which identify the respective societal problem, display the divine alternative to the problem, and empowers individuals to make that promising alternative a reality.

If our churches will rise to the occasion to meet the holistic needs of the community, the preachers cannot be so focused on other areas of ministry while ignoring sounding the trumpet of justice to bring transformation to our communities. McMickle states, “Prophetic Preaching is absent from the scene because too many of those whose responsibility it is to raise the issues of justice and righteousness have become distracted and preoccupied with other topics and other aspects of ministry.”²⁹ I agree with McMickle who asserts that although the responsibilities of ministry can include administration, leadership development, pastoral care, visitation, organizational management, counseling, and

²⁸ Wilson, J. Matthew. *From Pews to Polling Places*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 2007, 140-142

²⁹ McMickle, 9

community engagement, these aspects of ministry should not function as a distraction that keep a pastor from preaching prophetically.

It should be noted that although prophetic preaching in certain pulpits has been deprioritized due an infatuation with praise, patriotism, and prosperity, those three deterrents do not represent the full scope of why many preachers avoid prophetic preaching. Tisdale highlights key reasons why certain preachers resist prophetic preaching. Tisdale notes the following additional reasons why preachers avoid prophetic preaching, which include, “The main resistances to prophetic preaching include an inherited model of biblical interpretation that marginalizes the prophetic dimensions of scripture, pastoral concern for parishioners, fear of conflict, fear of dividing a congregation, fear of being disliked/rejected/made to pay a price, feelings of inadequacy, and discouragement that one’s prophetic witness is not making a difference.”³⁰ The lists of observations that Tisdale details accentuates the fact that not only is prophetic preaching viewed differently, it also takes a toll on the prophetic voice and it comes with a cost for those who take the risk of sharing a message that will possibly be rejected, disliked, or hated.

When some people read the Bible, they overlook the plethora of references regarding God’s concern for the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners. Some may resist prophetic preaching because care and compassion for the most vulnerable is a core goal of this mode of proclamation. This resistance unveils the propensity of preachers to selectively use scriptures, principles, and rituals that they prefer over others.

³⁰ Tisdale, 10-20

Some of America's most prominent white preachers avoid preaching sermons that address racism, societal injustice, oppression, and marginalization because of potentially sparking controversy and division within their congregations, some of them who have taken a stand have experienced opposition from both laity and other leaders.³¹ McMickle states, "Evangelical preachers in America who have the largest followings and the highest name recognition seem to have nothing to say on matters of justice and righteousness."³² I have witnessed major televangelists in news interviews defend their stance of steering clear of preaching justice because it does not appeal to their donors, it offends those who view preaching justice as preaching politics, and some of them believe that using the sermon to challenge unjust systems that govern the country is unpatriotic.³³

Other resistance to prophetic preaching is interconnected. While some preachers avoid it because they do not want to give the congregation bad news, they have to realize that the Good News (The Gospel) would not be as life-changing if there was not bad news that it had to counter. I mean, hope would not be important, if despair did not exist. Tisdale suggests that fear is one of the underlying reasons why some people are resistant to prophetic preaching. Whether that is fear of conflict, dividing a congregation, or the message being disliked. It is quite intriguing that the main deterrent to prophetic preaching is the same attribute that scripture instructs us the most not to have: fear.

These fears are real, but they should not be used as barriers that keep proclaimers from using the pulpit to speak truth to power. Preachers are tasked to share the message

³¹ John C. Richards & Daniel Yang, Christianity Today, "Preaching on Racism from the 'White' Pulpit", 12 Apr. 2018

³² McMickle, 14

³³ Ruth Graham, New York Times, "Preaching or Avoiding Politics, Conservative Churches Walk A Delicate Line", 1 November. 2020

that God gives. They do not speak on their own accords. Prophetic preachers speak boldly when the message is not affirmed, when it causes conflict, and even when a division within the congregation occurs. The central objective of the proclamation of the Gospel is not for it to be palatable, but for it be spiritually profitable. The proclaimer also has to realize that it is possible to be a prophetic witness without siding with certain political parties, dividing people into “us vs. them” or marginalizing congregants who do not share your respective worldview. Although politics, race, and economics could be seen as the divisive means in prophetic preaching; justice, equality, and family of God should be seen as the unifying ends.

The marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised need to hear prophetic preaching, but those in positions of power, privilege, and prestige also need to hear and even adhere to prophetic preaching. Marvin A. Mickle states that, “It is crucial that people with wealth, power, and influence be challenged by a prophetic word that calls upon them to direct their resources not simply for tax advantages for themselves, but for a fairer and more just society for their fellow citizens.”³⁴ Privileged people need to hear prophetic preaching because the central tenets of this mode of proclamation can potentially inspire them to use their affluence and influence to make the world a more just, equitable, and prosperous place for all people. Prophetic Preaching in this regard is not vilifying prosperity, but it does challenge those within that group to use their platform to promote social good for all people. McMickle asserts that they need to hear prophetic preaching to realize that their wealth/power should not be used to solely benefit them, but should be strategically used to expand opportunities and dismantle unjust systems that keep the

³⁴ McMickle, 4

underprivileged from having the level of access to the prosperity that they to enjoy. Prophetic preaching has the potential to disclose that the rich and powerful like the government and corporations have a moral obligation to combat racism, sexism, ageism, inequality, poverty, police brutality, discrimination, and disinvestment. I believe that one of the most important reasons that the affluent need to hear prophetic preaching is because this mode of preaching could realistically challenge them to reevaluate money as a mode of exchange that should be utilized for the betterment of the many rather than the enrichment of the few.

We cannot allow the pervasiveness of fear, rejection, and disruption to cause the church to silence its voice in speaking for the social justice, economic empowerment, and community uplift within society. James H. Evans, Jr. states, “The African American church must practice an ethic of empowerment. The church must recognize and defend its historic claim that faith is essentially empowerment, and that any ministry or sociopolitical or economic structure that fosters dependence, degradation, or despair is not the product of true faith.”³⁵ Prophetic Preaching is a vehicle which fosters empowerment within the black congregation. Embracing God’s vision of a loving world, fighting for justice on a local level, and applying the spirit of prophetic preaching has a way of enabling congregants to take an effective stand against the structures which promote injustice, inequality, and division within their communities. Faith empowers them to have the courage to challenge the status quo, generate hope to envision new possibilities, and to demonstrate persistence

³⁵ Evans Jr, James H. “The Prophetic Role of African American Churches in the 21st Century”, *Yale Reflections Magazine*, Winter 2006 Edition, pg. 36

in making the possibility of a world where justice is the norm and all people are treated with dignity and respect into a reality.

It is the responsibility of the black church to reclaim its place and platform within the black community by reviving prophetic witness in the pulpit and the pew. This endeavor will not be accomplished by the masses, but like most successful movements in history, it will be accomplished by a faithful few. Marvin A. McMickle states that, “The work of justice has always been pursued by a minority of people, a faithful few who were willing to take a stand. The recovery of prophetic preaching and prophetic action will likely begin with little more than a remnant.”³⁶ It is the remnant, like the small group of exiles that survived the Babylonian Captivity to rebuild the city, walls and temple of Jerusalem, the small sector of voices within both the pulpits and pews of churches that will resurrect prophetic preaching in our faith communities. This revival has the potential of equipping the church to empower the parishioners, create a bond with local communities, develop partnerships with other for-profit/philanthropic/governmental organizations, and maximize its capacity to foster social change in disinvested communities. The implementation of this vision requires the church to reclaim its position as a liberation-oriented organization which fights for the liberation of all people regardless of difference.

³⁶ McMickle, 123

Missional Stewardship

It's time for tithes and offering! This was the typical refrain that I heard from the preacher during Sunday Morning Worship, which indicated it was time to give money collectively to the church. After hearing the minister read Malachi 3:8-12 regarding the imperative to give ten percent of one's income to the local church, congregants would open their wallets, ajar their purses, tear out their checks, and put their contributions in an envelope to place in the offering basket. During my generation giving has become more convenient. The prospective giver can give analogically, via the church website, via the U.S. mail, automated debit, via app, or via text-to-give.

Giving time at a black church is typically preceded by a pulpit exhortation, scripture, music, and a giving declaration to inspire congregants to give ten percent of their income plus an offering to the church. The giving categories may include Tithes, Offering, Building/Capital Fund, Missions, Youth & Children's Ministry, Pastor's Aid, Bus Fund, and/or Benevolence.

Discussing Stewardship

In many black churches giving is taught to be both a grace and mode of worship by which one express gratitude for the blessings that God has bestowed. The fundamental teaching concerning giving is that God is the source and money is the resource. Tithing in my experience has been taught as a relevant stewardship discipline in the black church because it functions as a method by which the giver is empowered to acknowledge God as the source of their resources. The tithe is taught to be relevant today amongst Christians because it was practiced before, during, and after the Law of Moses. Kenneth C. Ulmer states, "As history indicates, the tithe didn't begin with a law; it began with Abram's

gratitude to God as the source of his victory, and Abram’s honoring the blessing given him by the king-priest Melchizedek by giving Melchizedek (as a representative of God) a portion of the spoils. Thus, the establishment of the tithe involved: a person, a principle, a priest, and a promise.”¹ Money is a common theme within the black church experienced not merely from the standpoint of giving, but also as it relates to financial management and economic empowerment initiatives and resources which have recently become a major area championed by many black churches that aspire to get parishioners out of debt, owing property, and securely investing for their retirement.²

According to a number of unchurched individuals who I have dialogued with, the giving segment of the service cause great consternation because they feel that the church like any other institution is just after their money. A sense of skepticism amongst church attendees and the unchurched is raised even further considering the instances of malfeasance, scandals, and accounting issues³ revolving around church finances. A sizable percentage of black millennials express that they are reluctant to give money to religious institutions because of uncertainty about where the funds go, distrust of the accounting/appropriation processes of these institutions, and a belief that religion is a capitalist-oriented industry that is out to make money.⁴ Despite the various inhibitions that people have about giving, some people will always have reluctance about giving to their church. That reluctance of the hand usually stems from a sense of reluctance in the heart. Jamie Dunlop aptly states, “If someone feels they can’t in good conscience give to their

¹ *Making Your Money Count*, 83-84

² Taylor, Donna. *Financial Empowerment in the African-American Church*, Balboa Press, Carlsbad, 2018

³ Kathy Lohr, NPR, “Senator Probes Megachurches Finances,” 4 December. 2017

⁴ Harriet Sherwood, The Guardian, “Religion in US worth more than Google and Apple combined”, 15 Sept. 2016

church, something almost certainly needs to change. They must either educate their conscience (so they can give) or find a new church.”⁵ The local church cannot be sustained without the financial support of its parishioners. It is also a valid concern to question where does the money go, are there proper measures/personnel in place to foster transparency, and how does the funds promote the overall mission that Christ left the church to fulfill in the Earth.

Jesus talked about money more than heaven and hell combined.⁶ I believe he spoke with such regularity about money because he recognized its ability to disclose what we love, what we value, and what we prioritize. Money can be viewed as an amoral mode of exchange whereby we access goods, services, and experiences, but it does have a much larger influence in society and within the life of the local church. Hopefully the church has finally reached a day of reckoning as it relates to how it spends, saves, and invests money. Many of our churches are having problems as it relates to becoming financially sustainable. Rising maintenance costs, declining giving, an aging giving base, increased number of religious “nones”, dwindling attendance, and the growing secularization of America are serious threats to the survival of the local church.⁷

If the objective is financial sustainability, should the church aspire to become financially sustainable to merely pay the bills, take care of the staff, maintain the edifice, and fortify the rainy-day fund? Or should financial stability serve as a catalyst to inspire

⁵ Dunlop, Jamie. *Budgeting for a Healthy Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2019, 40

⁶ Ulmer, Kenneth C. *Making Your Money Count*, Regal House Publishing, Raleigh, 2007

⁷ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace”, Pew Research Center, 17 October. 2019

the church to take a lead role in community engagement, social uplift, and the promotion of the common good?

I believe that giving should not be impulsive. Giving should not be imperative. Giving should be inspirational. You inspire the heart behind the hand to give when the church connects its mission/money, direction/dividends, and purpose/proceeds. The church should inspire the heart before it invites the hand in giving. It is high-time that the mission of the church guide how it saves, spends, and invests the money of the parishioners, visitors, and donors that fund it.

Mark Deymaz states, “As with the growing burden on America’s middle class, marginal increases in religious giving, and a shift in generational approaches to giving, rapidly changing demographics will greatly affect church budgets. Such things will likely lead to a loss in revenue and to a fundamental reshaping of the way congregations are funded.”⁸ Deymaz awakens us to the reality that the continual increase in the cost of living, the slow growth of the population, the rapid aging of the population, will have a direct impact on the way that we fund churches. He highlights that societal demographics have a seismic impact on the finances of the church.

A key aspect of grappling with the demographic and the generational factors which affect giving is the changing giving approaches of millennials. Thom S. Rainer notes that, “They want to be certain the church is a good steward of the contributed funds. Giving to the institution is the motive of most of the Builder generation. Subsequent generations are

⁸ Deymaz, Mark. *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2019, 39

more likely to give to a cause or a vision.”⁹ Based on my conversations with Christian Millennials throughout various sections of Philadelphia, they continually vocalize that they are not motivated to merely give to keep the lights on and keep the church staff paid, they are motivated to give to a mission in which they can envision and see themselves having an impact in bringing it into fruition. Church leaders may find it useful to be aware that Millennials are not inspired to give to institutions, they are inspired to give to the implementation of a vision, cause that will bring seismic change within society.

Emphasizing stewardship related to discipleship can inspire giving. Robert N. Bacher states that, “The living out in daily life of Christian vocation flows from a profound understanding that all we have, everything we do, and the totality of who we are belong to God.”¹⁰ As stewards, we recognize God as the owner and humans as the overseers of the resources that God has entrusted into our care. When we properly recognize our role as stewards, we acknowledge our resources should be utilized to bring good to others and glory to God. John W. Wimberly Jr. states, “With sound financial practices in place and wise management of these practices, the congregation will exhibit faithful stewardship of its financial life.”¹¹ This mindset concerning stewardship is a major part of discipleship. Not only must parishioners be faithful stewards of the resources that God provides; churches should also be faithful stewards of the resources that parishioners have contributed to fulfill the mission of God. Jamie Dunlop states, “Your congregation’s use of money matters mainly as a window into the well-being of their souls. That makes the

⁹ Thom S. Rainer, Ministry Today, “6 Reasons Why Your Church Offering May Be Declining,” 30 March. 2016

¹⁰ Bacher, Robert N. *Church Administration*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, 123

¹¹ Wimberly Jr. John W. *The Business of The Church*, Rowan & Littlefield, Maryland, 2010, 103

budget more significantly as a pastoral tool than a financial tool. It's more about the communication of eternal values than about balancing the numbers."¹² The priorities of a church budget reflect the core of its soul and illuminates its existential and eschatological values as a faith community in alignment with the teachings of Christ.

The church budget serves not merely as a financial document, but as a reflector of the stewardship of the church resources especially in the areas where the money is spent, saved, and invested. Dunlop states, "God's purpose for your church's budget is that in your church's faithfulness-that is, in your risk-taking obedience-you show off and reveal how amazing he is. Risk giving, value-based investing, and God's blessings are three main ways a budget can show off the glory of God."¹³ A number of seasoned church leaders, who have been successful in challenging their respective congregations to reimagine the role of giving, have voiced to me that too often our churches have seen budgets/beliefs, money/mission, and proceeds/purpose from an "either/or" perspective instead of a "both/and" perspective. The budget of the church defines the values, priorities, and aspirations of a congregation.

Dunlop states in *Budgeting for A Healthy Church* that:

A useful concept from the world of business is that budgeting should be directed by strategy. That is, what you're trying to do should dictate how you invest your money. A strategy boils down to two fundamental components: your target market and your source of competitive advantage. Your target market is whomever God brings through your doors and your competitive advantage is the Gospel ¹⁴

¹² Dunlop, 139

¹³ Dunlop, 28

¹⁴ Dunlop, 47

The church cannot be a good steward without strategically marrying its mission to its money. The central aspirations of a ministry should be reflected in its budget. Some churches have modeled Rick Warren's paradigm of the five purposes of the church (i.e., worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions)¹⁵ as key pillars of their church vision. If so, investment in each of those five pillars should be reflected in the annual budget.

Churches have to continually grapple with the different giving approaches considering that many church members are dying out, the sanctuaries are a quarter filled, maintenance/utility costs are rising, and they have not gained new members (contributors).¹⁶ Many of our churches have a majority Builder demographic (born before 1946) population. Although that generation gives faithfully, one should recognize both that they are on fixed incomes, and that they have more time behind them, than in front of them. Some pastoral leaders have responded to this crisis by taking exceptional steps to design ministries that cater to the needs of children, youth, young adults, and families. These steps are usually taken to extend the longevity of the church by making it intergenerational.¹⁷ Other churches have not successfully attracted youth/families have taken a number of options to combat their declines in giving including cutting staff, reducing hours of operations, shifting to a volunteer janitorial team, making significant budget cuts, and/or selling their current location to move into a smaller, more economically feasible location. Although the approaches listed above have worked to preserve some churches from

¹⁵ Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010

¹⁶ Jonathan Merritt, The Atlantic, "America's Epidemic of Empty Churches", 25 November. 2018

¹⁷ John Boyle, The Citizen Times, "With Millennials less likely to believe in God, churches work hard to buck trends", 31 March. 2018

extinction, others have to take more innovative, disruptive routes to reach financial sustainability.¹⁸

Austerity is not a viable route to reaching the destination of financial sustainability. Innovation as it relates to creative methods to generate revenues both through the goods and services that the church provides, is the path to sustainability. Mark Deymaz states that, “Without disruptive innovation, churches and church plants will continue to struggle financially or soon be forced to close, and valuable resources will be needlessly squandered.”¹⁹ While I agree with the spirit behind Deymaz’ emphasis on disruptive innovation, I do not necessarily agree with the letter behind his theory because this theory is not readily transferable in your average church. Church leaders and laity must realize that customs, consolidations, and cuts will not be adequate to preserve the church. This issue requires creative methods to generate revenue in between Sundays. Mark Deymaz states, “Whether yet validated by your experiences or not, churches will become more reliant on multiple streams of income in the future and soon need to leverage their assets in order to generate a financial return on investment (ROI).²⁰ Churches could potentially create multiple streams of income by renting the sanctuary out for weddings/funerals, serving as an election polling location, renting out its parking lot to commuters, hosting civic events in its community center, and by acquiring rental properties to fund its initiatives, programs, and ministries while decreasing its reliance on tithes and offering as its central source of funding.

¹⁸ Michael Paulson, The NY Times, "Denominations Downsizing & Selling Assets in more Secular Era", 15 Mar. 2014

¹⁹ Deymaz, 76

²⁰ Deymaz, 35

Harry Li states that, “In the twenty-first century pastors must act with intentionality not only to promote worship, evangelism, and discipleship, but also to generate profitable income. As good and faithful servants, we can no longer sit on our assets while begging for money. We must learn to create multiple streams of income.”²¹ The changing racial demographics, economic burdens, and generational giving patterns has challenged church leaders to determine how to creatively generate multiple streams of income to support and sustain their church. Whereas Deymaz is important for churches that have multiple streams of income to sustain themselves, it must be noted that every church needs to do its own unique internal assessment to determine how its size, finances, demographics, location, and denominational polity impact its ability or inability to generate multiple streams of income. This mandate has not always been a responsibility of the pastor, but this century has made it yet another task that the twenty-first century pastor has to fulfill. This reality also makes it imperative that denominations, seminaries, and divinity schools teach aspiring ministers about church finances, budgeting, and economics. The successful pastor in this generation will have to know how to creatively generate income to sustain their respective faith community. Fortifying the modes by which the church expands its multiple streams of income allows the church to reduce the financial burden on its parishioners, invest in others key ministry areas, and lead to financial sustainability without perpetual cuts and consolidations.

Harry Li says, “To assume or to argue that God intends for a local church to struggle financially while sitting on its assets as leaders, wait, hope, and pray for provisions— as if to do so somehow makes them more spiritual—is misguided at best and certainly a poor

²¹ Deymaz, 95

excuse to maintain the status quo.”²² Church leaders cannot wait on God to fix their financial challenges, they have to use their faith to leverage their assets (i.e., people, properties, and proceeds) to become financially sustainable. Churches that have members who are entrepreneurs could potentially leverage the asset of people by engaging entrepreneurs within the congregation to serve on board/committees, whereby they bring their business background to the table to creatively generate ideas to create system, structures, and strategies to promote the financial sustainability of the church. Mark Deymaz also affirms that the asset of people is also maximized when church staff members are given the ability to take lower salaries while having flexible hours to generate income outside their church position. Engaging members who have backgrounds in finances/accounting is yet another mode by which ideas and initiatives could potentially be created to lead to sustainability. When key parishioners can use their career backgrounds and skillsets to advance the sustainability of the ministry, they promote their spiritual formation while also fortifying the longevity of the church. Although the recommendations of Deymaz are probable, I believe they fail to take into account that their efficacy is limited to certain context. That is, they assume that members with finance backgrounds want to deal with balance sheets and income statements beyond their 9-5, and overlook the reality that some people have multiple part-time jobs because they cannot generate income outside of having a job.

The asset of facilities can be leveraged by renting the church building for weddings, funerals, and community events. The parking lot could house a clothes/shoes drop box as another revenue generator. If the church has classrooms, a gymnasium, rental

²² Deymaz, 145

properties, or commercial real estate, they all could be potentially rented out for events, housing, and office space for businesses. There are a plethora of viable ideas to leverage facilities as an asset to generate additional revenue for the church in between Sundays.

Describing Social Good

The asset of money can be leveraged by allowing current members, staff to inspire people within their respective networks to financially invest in their church. Bacher states, “While businesses say, “Give me your money in return for a product or experience,” and most nonprofits say, share your wealth to serve others who are more needy,” the church says, “respond to God’s generosity as part of your discipleship!” In other words, our focus should be as much on the donor’s need and privilege to give as on our ministry’s need to receive support.”²³ Giving is a win-win both for the donor and the church, this happens when donors who are not members are inspired to give not merely as a result of God’s generosity toward them, but because of their realization that giving to the mission of the local church is an indispensable factor of being a follower of Christ. Whereas I agree with Bacher, I have some qualms with his universal recommendation that establishing partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and corporations is another way that revenue outside of traditional tithes and offering can be used to get the church on a path to financial sustainability. Although this is a credible recommendation, it naively assumes that the respective church is connected to local organizations that have the means to donate, it overlooks that many businesses like the church are struggling to balance their books, and

²³ Bacher, 119

it automatically assumes that the charitable arm of corporations are comfortable partnering with a religious institution.

Mark Deymaz poses an important question for church leaders to consider. “How can a church leverage its assets to bless the community and generate sustainable income? Indeed, if leaders don’t address this question today, they may not have a church tomorrow.”²⁴ Church leaders have to continually allow the changing demographics, shifting generational giving patterns, and church decline to function as the catalyst by which they generate creative ideas and initiatives to ensure that the church has a viable future for generations to come. The factors listed above should not discourage church leaders, but rather fuel them to figure how to navigate those factors to create a financially viable church that can serve the congregants and the community, both in the immediate present and in the distant future.

As stated earlier, cuts and consolidations are inadequate measures to produce a financially sustainable ministry alone. Creativity is paramount to accomplish such a result. Those creative methods are not limited to creating multiple streams of income, leveraging church assets, monetizing existing services, and starting a community development corporation. Ulrich Luz states, “In short, Matthew concludes his Gospel in a manner quite unusual for Protestant sensibilities, by intermingling grace and commandments, the ‘indicative’ and the ‘imperative’ of salvation. Jesus’ commandments are the gospel that his disciples owe to the world. They represent the Father’s will to redeem the world.”²⁵ Church

²⁴ Deymaz, 146

²⁵ Luz, Ulrich. *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 140-141

leaders would do well by revisiting the Great Commission²⁶ as they seek to utilize creativity to preserve their church. It should be noted that in the Great Commission, Jesus lists the who (the 12), what (make disciples, baptize them, teach them), when (until his return), where (all the world), but he never told them how.

The absence of the “how” did not represent the incompleteness of the commission, but the window of creativity that Jesus gave the disciples to utilize multi-faceted methods to accomplish the commission. This is exactly what contemporary church leaders and laity must do to navigate the various demographical, generational, financial, and cultural changes to make their respective churches financially sustainable to guarantee their future and fortify their ability to be an asset within their local communities.

Sustainability as Essential to Stewardship and Social Good

The reality of giving remains a complex subject in the church, the essence of stewardship, the fact that tithes and offerings are not enough, and that the church has to both establish multiple streams of income and leverage its assets to become financially sustainable has guided the course of this chapter. One should question, if financial sustainability is the end (purpose) of implementing the measures above is it the means. Although it can easily be seen as an end, it can actually function as a means. I believe that financial sustainability can function as a means to an end because it can better position a church to create impactful programs, projects, and pursuits to fulfill the mission that Christ gave it (i.e., The Great Commission, The Great Confession, The Great Commandment), invest in its local community, and to advance social good.

²⁶ Matthew 28:16-20 (New King James Version)

When the church becomes financially sustainable (i.e., having the ability to generate short-and-long-term revenue to maintain the operations, ministries, and campaigns of the church while simultaneously covering expenses and producing profits) it will be better equipped to fulfill the Great Commission. I find the tension that Dave Odom wrestles with in defining financial sustainability intriguing, he notes that having more revenue coming in than expenses going out does not adequately account for the gap produced by groups that benefit from generational wealth and black, brown people who do not possess that same benefit.²⁷ This commission is Jesus' final marching orders to his disciples. They were instructed to go throughout the entire world to make, baptize, and teach disciples from every nation. The contemporary implications for the modern-day church to carry out this commission is intentionally engaging in evangelism, outreach, missions (home/foreign). Emmanuel Jean Francois defines and describes financial sustainability from the perspective of a non-profit. Francois states, "When your non-profit is financially sustainable, you can maintain operations, grow resources to weather challenges, and accomplish your mission in the long run. It requires clear objectives, strategies, and action plans"²⁸ The definitions above disclose the customary components of financial sustainability, while also taking unique context, the reality of inequity, and the essence of strategic planning into consideration.

When the church is sustainable it then can plan mission trips, spread the Gospel to regions that are uninformed, provide essential good/services to the impoverished, and utilize modern technology to win the lost for Christ. Similarly, when the church is

²⁷ Dave Odom, Faith & Leadership, "What does financial sustainability mean in the midst of inequity?" 7 July 2020

²⁸ Francois, Emmanuel Jean. *Financial Sustainability for Nonprofit Organizations*, Springer, NY, 2014, 80

sustainable it can also better accomplish the Great Confession²⁹. Ulrich Luz states, “Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus’ divine sonship must prove its worth in everyday life. The recognition of the divine sonship is but one step on the path of the imitation of Jesus’ passion; it cannot be achieved without self-denial, suffering, and martyrdom.”³⁰ The Great Confession is Peter’s public proclamation in proximity to a religious center that venerated the iconic Greek deities at Pania³¹, that Jesus is God. The confession calls the modern church to proclaim his name which could materialize in the various ministries that the church has to utilize the respective spiritual gifts of its members to promote spiritual formation and edify the Body. Proclaiming Jesus could look like the church taking a stand against forces that seek to censor its voice, reverse its tax status, or challenge its religious liberties. Proclaiming the Name looks like born-again believers using creative methods to embody the Christian virtues (i.e., faith, hope, and love) in their schools, homes, businesses, communities, and on their social media platforms.

Financial sustainability practices also position the church to better accomplish the Great Commandment.³² Mark Allen Powell states, “John’s Gospel has more to say about love than the other three Gospels combined. The word *love* occurs well over fifty times in this book, and yet there is no mention of loving one’s neighbor or one’s enemies. The focus, rather is on loving one another—that is, on the love that believers have for each other. Jesus tells his followers that this is a “new commandment” and that everyone will know who his followers are by the love they have for one another.”³³ This commandment was Jesus’

²⁹ Matthew 16:18-20 (New King James Version)

³⁰ Luz, Ulrich. *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1993, 99

³¹ McLaren, Brian D. *We Make the Road by Walking*, Jericho Books, New York, 2014, 116

³² John 13:34-35 (New King James Version)

³³ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2009, 187

message to his disciples—they were to love each other to prove the authenticity of their discipleship. Sustainability would allow the church to better carry out this divine directive. Loving each other could not only mean sharing a special level of regard, affection, and care for each other. It could mean caring for our sick, feeding the homeless, assisting each other financially, offering words of counsel, providing comfort during bereavement, and creating projects/programs to meet the holistic needs of members within the faith community.

Becoming financially sustainable does not merely equip the church with respect to its obeisance to Christ; it also equips the church to fulfill its obligation to community. It should be noted that many black churches located in the urban centers of America are located in under resourced communities. These communities are plagued by unemployment, poverty, recidivism, addiction, mental trauma, dilapidated housing, healthcare disparities, underfunded schools, crime, and gun violence. The solutions to the problems listed above cannot be singlehandedly accomplished by the government, law enforcement, non-profits, educational institutions, or philanthropists. The church cannot do everything, but it can do something. When these churches become financially sustainable, they have the ability to become economic development incubators in these communities to bring jobs, housing, and essential goods/services.

Financial sustainability would also position the church from being "just another charity" to becoming a transformative institution that gather the essential governmental, educational, philanthropic, and community stakeholders to ascertain the resources needed to bring basic goods, services, and quality of life enhancements to the community. The church could potentially start an economic development corporation to improve education, housing, healthcare, public safety, and transportation within the community. The church

could lead the effort to hold the municipal governments accountable to serve their constituents, bring needed resources, and protect the community from predatory credit institutions. A financially sustainable church could tithe 10% of its annual resources back into the community, guarantee scholarships to all of its graduating seniors, support small businesses, host vocational training classes for ex-offenders, and use its economic status as seed money to inspire outside funders to invest in the future of the community. A financially sustainable church can potentially build homes for our seniors, remodel parks/recreation centers for youth, and ensure that after-school programs, internships, externships, and summer jobs are always available for youth within the community. A plethora of black churches located in urban centers have served as models of the initiatives described above. These churches have creative ministries, initiatives, and partnerships to address generational poverty, systemic racism, environmental injustice, economic development, homelessness, hunger, addiction, mental trauma, and underfunded education within their respective communities. Some of those churches include Greater Allen A.M.E. (Queens, NY), Southern Baptist Church (Baltimore, MD), First Corinthian Baptist Church (Harlem, NY), The Potter's House International Ministries (Jacksonville, FL), Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church (Memphis, TN), Faithful Central Bible Church (Inglewood, CA), St. Paul's Baptist Church (Philadelphia, PA), Ray of Hope Christian Church (Decatur, GA), The Baptist Worship Center (Philadelphia, PA), New Bethlehem Baptist Church (Baltimore, MD), Christ Missionary Baptist Church (Memphis, TN), St. John's United Methodist Church (Houston, TX), Eastern Star Church (Indianapolis, IN), Concord Church (Dallas, TX), South Euclid United Church of Christ (South Euclid, OH), Bates Memorial Baptist Church (Louisville, KY), West Point Baptist Church (Hattiesburg,

MS), Greater Grace Temple (Detroit, MI), and Antioch Missionary Baptist Church (Chicago, IL). These churches currently serve as national models as to how faith-based organizations can utilize their religious virtues and values to improve the lives of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. These efforts go a long way in helping the church to reclaim its relevance in a society that has a plethora of misgivings about organized religious institutions.

Mark Deymaz states that, “Churches should do so [leverage church assets] to participate in the local economy, help stimulate recovery, and promote revitalization efforts in neighborhoods that are underserved and under resourced. Indeed, churches will need to do so in the years ahead not only to survive but also to thrive in uncertain national and economic times, and in the process to advance a credible Gospel witness and influence.”³⁴ It is amazing that Jesus hung the entirety of the law and the prophets on the principle of love. Social (common) good can easily get conflated with politics, activism, and government. Social good in this context is defined as a social impact/action that positively impact an exceptionally large swath of peoples from all walks of life. A social good could be making community college free, making healthcare affordable for all, improving the quality of drinking water, reducing pollution, adequately funding public schools, and guaranteeing women equal-pay-for-equal-work.³⁵

The church cannot accomplish such feats unilaterally but it can align its proclamation, priorities, proceeds, and partnerships with like-minded entities that seek to promote social good. It is when the church can prove to society that faith is the motivating

³⁴ Deymaz, 146

³⁵ Reich, Robert B. *The Common Good*, First Vintage Books, New York, 2018

factor behind its passion to bring good to all people, that it then it can reclaim its witness in a broken world in need of healing, compassion, and uplift. Society needs to know that the church is not merely concerned with religious annual days, building bigger facilities, preaching the Bible, and recruiting followers. Society needs to be both inspired and informed by the church ability to share the same concerns, anxieties, and ideas that the average individual has. Advancing social good would allow the church to step out of the perimeters of its four walls to walk in the shoes of the voiceless, hopeless, and powerless.

When the church advances social goods, it simultaneously embodies the spirit and letter of the Great Commission, Great Confession, and Great Commandment. Social good allows the church to become a modern-day embodiment of the Lukan Jesus who had an affinity for the least, lost, and left-out (i.e., the poor, widows, sinners, foreigners, tax collectors, lepers, and women).³⁶ The church can redouble its impact when it demonstrates this level of compassion for people that do not worship like us, look like us, speak like us, vote like us, or dress like us. The *Imago Dei* is aptly incarnated when the church sees all people regardless of their differences, as children of God, that should be treated with decency, respect, and compassion.

Donald Senior states, “The first three “you” petitions of the prayer call for reverence for God’s name, for the coming of the Kingdom, and for God’s will to be done. The latter half expresses raw human need: for sustenance, for forgiveness, and for protection from the power of evil.”³⁷ The words of Jesus in the model prayer, “Your

³⁶ Levine, Amy-Jill. *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2002

³⁷ Senior, Donald, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1997, 106-107

kingdom come your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven”³⁸ comes to life when the advancement of social good is made a key priority of the church. God’s kingdom of justice, fairness, and equality that is manifested in Heaven is actualized on Earth when the community of faith advance causes that promotes social good.

Becoming financially sustainable should never be the ends of a church. It should be the means by which the church can utilize its economic, social, and political capital to fulfill the mission of Christ, invest in underprivileged communities, and promote social good which improves the quality of life of all people, that is the goal of missional stewardship!

³⁸ Matthew 6:10 (New King James Version)

Intergenerational Ministry

Is the black church still relevant? I had to intentionally pause before issuing a response to this question, which was asked of me. I had to pause before responding to see the question for what it was, not as an affront to my life's work as a pastor, but as a fitting question percolating within the hearts and minds of countless Millennials. Another way of asking this question: is the black church dead? Has it outlived its purpose, failed to meet the collective needs of the congregation/community, has it taken on a different mission than the one issued to it by Jesus before his Ascension? This question comes further to a head as some church sanctuaries are at 25% capacity, parishes are falling into disrepair, maintenances costs are overwhelming church budgets, internal conflicts are escalating, aging members are dying out, and developers are repurposing sanctuaries into cultural institutions, office spaces, and condominiums.¹

I frequently read about church buildings being repurposed to become community centers, condos, office spaces, music venues, and auditoriums.² At some point in time that church building was filled with people, weekly services, daily activities, and consistent contributors. One could conclude that church scandals, rising maintenance costs, lawsuits, declining membership, shrinking finances, and gentrification has been attributed as the reasons why church buildings across the country are being repurposed.

When our churches are predominately made up of seniors, it must be acknowledged that if intentional steps are not taken to reach children, youth, young adults, and families those particular faith communities will be standing on their last generational leg. Joshua L.

¹ Bryan K. Clontz, Forbes, "Repurposing or Decommissioning Houses of Worship," 28 September. 2020

² Amelia Nirenberg, The New York Times, "New Spirits Rise in Old, Repurposed Churches," 25 Oct. 2020

Mitchell in *Black Millennials & The Church* does an in-depth exegetical analysis of the miracle of *Peter Walking on Water*³ to portray how the black church has failed to reach Millennials, highlight the ongoing factors that are exacerbating this reality, and amplify strategic steps the church could take to reach disenchanting black Millennials. Mitchell states that, “While some of us may not openly admit it, we are frightened by the lack of young adult participation in our churches. As we watch the current stakeholders of our congregations continue to age, we face a scary reality—a reality that could spell the slow death of many of our local assemblies.”⁴ Many churches are failing in this department because many of them are more committed to traditionalism than to transformation, power than to progress, and continuity than to change.

Geoff Surratt outlines the common practices that churches do which inhibit them from growing. He lists: trying to do it all, establishing the wrong role for the pastor’s family, providing a second-rate worship experience, settling for low quality in Children’s Ministry, promoting talent over integrity, clinging to a bad location, copying another successful church, favoring discipling over reconciliation, mixing ministry/business, and letting committees steer the ship as the ten stupid things that churches do that keep them from growing.⁵ There are three characteristics in his lists (i.e., providing a second-rate worship experience, settling for low-quality in children’s ministry, and letting committees steer the ship) that seem to me as issues that inhibit the intergenerational growth of black churches. Some of our churches do not make the necessary financial and talent investment to ensure that they produce an exceptional worship experience for weekly service. One of

³ Matthew 14:22-33 (New King James Version)

⁴ Mitchell, Joshua L. *Black Millennials & The Church*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 2018, 4

⁵ Surratt, Geoff. *Ten Stupid Things That Keep Churches from Growing*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2009

the major components of this failure is not recruiting talented musicians and singers to usher in the presence of God as the congregants sing the hymns, congregational anthems, and contemporary worship songs during service. Another component would be not starting on time, not having a structured service, the service being too long, and services lacking the transformative presence of God.

As a former youth pastor and as a senior pastor in communication with current youth directors, they continually voice that too often our churches have verbalized that children's ministry is important, but fail to actualize that statement either in adequate funding or recruitment of talent. The efficacy of this ministry serves as the determining factor as it relates to whether a new family will visit and whether they will make the decision to join. Children's ministry should be properly promoted and funded to attract talented individuals equipped to foster the spiritual formation of children to ultimately guarantee that they grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus as adults.

Based on my research and conversations with black pastors who started leading historic black churches when they were in their 20's and 30's, they frequently attest that letting committees steer the ship has been a cause of contention and a key inhibitor of growth for institutional black Baptist churches in particular.⁶ When the pastor is not given the designated power and authority to implement the vision that God has given him/her the growth of a church is stunted. This frequently happen when churches are governed by committees who have the power to undercut and dismiss the plan that God has ordained to foster the growth of the congregation. Power must be handled properly; the effective pastoral leader would be wise to view power not as tool to control or as an avenue to abuse,

⁶ Gary V. Simpson, Christianity Today, "The Young Pastor in an Older Church", 1 April. 1991

but as an asset to be earned and a gift to be redeemed.⁷ All three of the inhibitors of growth actually hinder a church from having longevity, become intergenerational.

Strategies & Benefits of Reaching Millennials

If churches aspire to survive under the current circumstances, they have to be intentional about being intergenerational. They have to be intentional about having programs, projects, and promotions geared toward attracting young people and new families while meeting the needs of parishioners that are older. Edward H. Hammett in *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60* contrasts the reality of how church culture values and the postmodern values of the older and younger generations respectively make it difficult to satisfy both groups. He simultaneously offers a blueprint of how churches can reach both generations by helping them acknowledge and incorporate the preferences, priorities, and principles of both generations into the outreach ministries and overall culture of the church, this method is defined by Gary L McIntosh as “blending.”⁸ Hammett states that, “Part of the challenge of reaching people under forty while keeping those over sixty is a generational issue because generations have different preferences for how they worship, learn, lead, relate, do ministry, and interact with one another.”⁹ They have different personal preferences and lifestyles, styles of music, and attire. Too often this has boiled down to being an “either/or” controversy instead of a “both/and” conversation. The answer is not the younger or the older, the answer is both groups. Any church that endeavors to have longevity must embrace intergenerational ministry. Holly Catterton Allen in *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through*

⁷ Crouch, Andy. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2013

⁸ McIntosh, Gary L. *One Church, Four Generations*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2002, 214

⁹ Hammett, Edward H. *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60*, Chalice, St. Louis, 2007, 31

Intergenerational Ministry emphasizes why the time to become intergenerational is now, what intergenerational change looks like in the 21st Century, current research on the topic, essential steps to take to include every generation, and models of how various churches have taken unique approaches to become intergenerational within their specific ministry context. Allen says, “Intergenerational Ministry occurs when a congregation intentionally brings the generations together in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the core activities of the church in order to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community.”¹⁰ This notion is more easily said than done considering the perspectives, preferences, and priorities which separate the generations, but this should not be a deterrent, it should be a catalyst for the respective faith community to innovatively discover how to be one church that ministers to the multifaceted spiritual needs of multiple generations.

The growing secularization of America, the growing number of “religious nones”, distrust of organized religion, fallout from ethical/financial scandals, antiquated theological beliefs about gender/sexuality, and failing to reach Millennials (1980-1994) and the iGen/Gen Z (1995-2010) generations are key reasons many churches are experiencing decline.¹¹ These generations represent the future of the church and are disproportionately unchurched. If the church continues to fail to reach them it will be standing on its proverbial last generational leg. Both groups have misgivings about the church which range from ageism to scandals, hypocrisy, controversial interpretations of

¹⁰ Allen, Holly Catterton. *InterGenerate*, Abilene Christian University Press, Texas, 2018, 136

¹¹ Morgan Lee, Christianity Today, “What to Understand about Christianity’s Decline in America”, 27 Nov. 2019

scripture, traditional gender roles, antiquated beliefs about sexuality, and the lack of community engagement.¹²

Joshua L. Mitchell states that Millennials view the church like the disciples viewed Jesus when they saw him walking on water, as a ghost, something that was once alive, but now dead. Mitchell states, “In many ways the disciples’ view of Jesus (i.e., that he was a ghost, something dead that was once alive) is consistent with the way black Millennials view the traditions, programming, and teachings of the Christian church.”¹³ I agree with the spirit behind Mitchell’s statement, but tradition is not the correct term here, he is actually referring to what Jaroslav Pelikan defines as the dead faith of the living, which is not tradition, but traditionalism.¹⁴ I have gathered from both my research and surveys of black millennials¹⁵ that many of them view the church as dead because many of the practices, doctrines, and services are emblems of traditionalism (everything is done the same time, the same way, with no openness to change or innovation). The church is also viewed as dead by many Millennials because traditionalism is paramount, change is not championed, creativity is stifled, criticism is the customary response to difference, the glory days of the past are valued above the potential possibilities of the future, and because a clear, concise vision to chart a preferable future for the ministry is not embraced.

¹² Christine Emba, The Washington Post, “Why Millennials are Skipping Church and Not Coming Back”, 27 Oct. 2019

¹³ Mitchell, 7

¹⁴ Carey, Joseph (June 26, 1989). “Christianity as an Enfolding Circle [Conversation with Jaroslav Pelikan]”. U.S. News & World Report. 106 (25). p.57.

¹⁵ Meagan Jordan, Black Youth Project, “Millennials are not skipping the church, the Black Church is Skipping Us”, 31 Dec. 2019

Many churches are failing to reach Millennials not because the older generation is inherently threatened by them, but because they cannot properly identify or understand them. Millennials are individuals that were born sometime between 1980-1994. Mitchell states that, “The Millennial generation is also the most educated, most racially diverse, and most religiously unaffiliated generation that our nation has ever produced.”¹⁶ This generational cohort is unique from previous generations because of the percentage of this cohort that is not religiously connected. Although they believe in God, they do not identify as being religious, they more likely identify as being spiritual (i.e., believing in the existence of God independent of any organized religious institution).¹⁷

Geoff Surratt shares that, “This group (Millennials) is spiritual but not religious. They are truth seekers, but they generally want to determine for themselves what is true, accepting all religions as valid. Even if they call themselves Christian, they determine for themselves what beliefs they hold, and those beliefs may or may not be based on the Bible.”¹⁸ I have witnessed a sizable number of Millennials identify as spiritual rather than religious. I have gathered that they prefer the label spiritual instead of religious, because many of them partake in various inward and outward spiritual disciplines of praying, fasting, meditation, study, and service¹⁹ independent of having a formal association with an organized religious institution.

Paul Taylor suggests that, political backlash (many Millennials have turned away from organized religion, because they perceive it as deeply entangled with conservative

¹⁶ Mitchell, 15

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, "Millennials are less Religious than Older Americans, but just as Spiritual", 23 Nov. 2015

¹⁸ Surratt, 43

¹⁹ Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline*, HarperCollins, New York City, 1978

politics, and do not want to have any association with it), the correlation between the delay in marriage for Millennials and religious affiliation (amongst adults under 30, the married are more likely to have a religious affiliation), and the growth of the religious ‘nones’ as a manifestation of much broader social disengagement.²⁰ The theories of Taylor have a substantial level of credibility. Many Millennials see Christianity as being aligned with the policies of the conservative Republican Party (i.e., opposition to marriage equality, civil rights for the LGBTQ community, women’s reproductive rights, and climate change).²¹ Single Millennials are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than married Millennials, because many of them began to see the significance of religion once they become married and start having children. The growth of the ‘nones’ is yet another manifestation that Millennials have a unique sense of disengagement from institutions whether they be religious, economic, civil, or governmental institutions.

Too often church leaders devote so much time to complaining about their inability to reach Millennials that they neglect to have the right conversations to see what they can do to actually foster an environment where Millennials would not only want to attend, but belong. F. Douglass Powe in *New Wine, New Wineskins* describes how the *African-American Church* was the cornerstone of the community, but lost its footing after the Civil Rights Movement. He argues that the time is now for the church to reclaim its influential role in the community by utilizing new approaches that take into consideration cultural shifts, generational divides, and technological innovations to reach new generations. Powe states that, “Reaching black Millennials will require finding space outside the church to

²⁰ Taylor, Paul. *The Next America*, PublicAffairs, New York City, 2016

²¹ Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, “Political Ideologies Among Christians”

create sanctuary; increasing collaboration across generations within the church; and becoming open to the Spirit's desire and ability to bridge the communication gap between the language of the Millennials and the older generation."²² The church has to reimagine community outside the four walls of the sanctuary, create collaborations with the Boomers/Gen Xers, and find a medium that allows the communication partitions to be broken down between the generations.

During my tenure as a senior pastor in an inner-city, I frequently heard Millennials vocalize that it is essential that the church create safe spaces for them to disclose their vulnerabilities, share the reasons why they have issues with the church, and to uplift what steps the church can take to redeem itself in their eyes. Millennials cannot walk in their truth until they feel like they are in a faith community where they will not be judged for what they say, how they dress, who they love, and what they think. Joshua L. Mitchell defines safe space as, "The cultivation of physical, emotional, intellectual, and theological places of engagement where principles can be explored, explained, and even expelled without silencing or devaluing the experience or personhood of those within the community."²³ The creation of "safe space" is not a one-time project. It is an ongoing process that the church must be sincerely dedicated to building, inviting, embracing, and engaging Millennials.

Millennials should not merely be expected to invest in the local church; the local church should also have a disposition of investing in the spiritual, emotional, and relational growth of this group. Joshua L. Mitchell states, "It is imperative for congregations to

²² Powe Jr., F. Douglass. *New Wine, New Wineskins*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2012

²³ Mitchell, 60

develop a disposition of investment and empowerment toward the young adults we seek to disciple, and to do so without any other agenda than to help them see Jesus.”²⁴ Millennials cannot merely be viewed by the local church as the proverbial ATM that is expected to give withdrawals, while never receiving tangible and intangible deposits which foster their growth. They should also be empowered to assume leadership positions, introduce new ideas to transform the church, challenge the traditional systems the church operates under which may not be effective.

Robert C. Tannehill states, “If they (the lawyer and the Jews that Jesus recited the Good Samaritan parable to) are finally willing to risk following the Samaritan into a love that asks no questions about ethnic or religious identity, they must first be willing to be taught by their enemy what love of neighbor means.”²⁵ When the church embodies the disposition of the Good Samaritan portrayed in the Gospel of Luke²⁶, it will more thoroughly be equipped to reach Millennials who have remained aloof because of their fear of hurt, rejection, judgment that they have experienced in the local church. Compassion is the indispensable ingredient that the local church must embody to create safe spaces where Millennials can go and grow. Monsignor William McCarthy defines compassion as, “The quality of being able to get inside the skin of another in order to respond with loving care.”²⁷ The process of having an open head, hand, and heart by which you are open to listen and learn from the experience of Millennials without judging them is needed to meet them where they are and taking them where they need to be in their journey of faith.

²⁴ Mitchell, 61

²⁵ Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, 184

²⁶ Luke 10:25-37 (New King James Version)

²⁷ McCarthy, Monsignor William. *The Conspiracy: An Innocent Priest*, iUniverse, Indiana, 2010

Joshua Mitchell states that, “while many (Millennials) professed an unwavering love for God, they were no longer willing to engage in community with the Church. The reasons almost always tied back to personal or familial stories of hurt experienced at the hands of the body of Christ.”²⁸ The church must intentionally initiate steps to demonstrate compassion toward 20-30-year-olds, which could potentially function as the balm which heals the wounds of fear, anxiety, and pain that many of them have already experienced in the church. Compassion must be the continual priority and position of the church to address the deterrents that have kept Millennials from getting fully involved with the church, a frequently cited deterrent is the possibility of experiencing “church hurt”. Emmett Price defines “church hurt” as the pain sometimes inflicted by religious institutions, a pain that distances sufferers from their communities and from God.²⁹ This posture of compassion views everyone as being made in the image of God, it believes that everyone should be treated with dignity/respect, and that we all have a moral obligation to use our gifts/abilities/resources to come to the aid of someone that is in need. The Hebrew Bible’s penchant for uplifting the cause of the vulnerable (i.e., the poor, widows, and strangers) and the Lukan Jesus perpetual affinity for the marginalized (i.e., women, lepers, gentiles, the sick, tax collectors, and sinners) should serve as the paradigm that inspire the church to extend compassion to marginalized Millennials.

Compassion for the local church should be demonstrated in its implementation of the great commandment³⁰, great commission³¹, and great confession.³² D. Moody Smith

²⁸ Mitchell, 49

²⁹ Julie Zauzmer, *The Washington Post*, “Damaged by the church?” 8 March. 2017

³⁰ John 13:34-35 (New King James Version)

³¹ Matthew 28:18-20 (New King James Version)

³² Matthew 16:16 (New King James Version)

states, “This love commandment (The Great Commandment) finds close parallels elsewhere in the NT and with good reason it has been taken as an apt summary of Jesus’ teaching. But in contrast to the Synoptics and Paul, who quote from Lev 19.18 the Johannine Jesus commands his disciples to love one another, i.e., other members of the inner circle, the church. This limitation agrees with John’s emphasis on the unity of the church and with its dualism. One would expect love to be directed to the circle of true disciples and not to the world”³³ One of the first steps to reaching Millennials is for the church to model the love that Jesus summoned his disciples to embody and summed his teachings with. Too often I have heard Millennials have the same critique that James Baldwin had of the church that, “there was no love in the church”³⁴ Love should play a major role in assuaging potential concerns about church hurt, creating safe spaces, and making Millennials feel that their vision and voice are valued.

Ulrich Luz says, “I feel that the Great Commission must be understood as just such a volte-face: from now on the disciples are to turn to the Gentiles. But to Matthew’s original readers ‘now’ referred to their own day, a time when the Gentile mission was apparently still a new or controversial task for the community. Having failed in Israel, the community has been assigned a new task by its Lord.”³⁵ One of the first steps for the church to reach Millennials is to embody the inclusive tone of the Great Commission. The church must be inclusive of all regardless of religion, race, age, class, sex, orientation, background, and origin. The church has to be intentional about people being inclusive in both fulfilling its

³³ D. Moody Smith, *John*. Edited by James L. Mays, HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Harper One, NYC, 1998, 977

³⁴ Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*, Vintage International, New York, 1962, 39

³⁵ Luz, Ulrich. *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge University Press, NYC, 1995, 140

mission and creating an embracive community which values the presence, perspective, and potential of Millennials.

Donald Senior says, “Matthew portrays Peter with the kind of mixed terms applied to the disciples as a whole: They understand Jesus and confess him as Son of God but are also fearful, doubting, and of “little faith.”³⁶ One of the first steps the church must take to reach Millennials is being dedicated to affirming the divinity of Jesus and demonstrating patience as it fosters the progressive spiritual growth of Millennials. The church to a degree has to see Millennials like Jesus saw Peter as a potential leader, in need of mentoring, opportunities, and encouragement as they progressively rise to their spiritual potential to make an impact for Christ.

Compassion must be conceptualized by the local church as mission, method, and mentality. The creation of safe spaces where Millennials feel like they are seen, heard, and valued is the quintessential step by which the church can take to reengage Millennials for the good of others and for the glory of God. Reaching Millennials is an essential step that the church must take to become intergenerational, but it is not the only step. In order for the church to be intergenerational, it must not only reach Millennials, it has to retain the older generation. The church has to also take key strategic steps to ensure that it is attractive, have the ability to attract new members and visitors on a regular basis. The proverbial intergenerational church must simultaneously meet the needs of every generation currently under its roof and every prospective new member or visitor that would become a part of it. James Emery White suggests that there are at least eight key decisions

³⁶ Senior, Donald. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1997, 139

that a church must make to become intergenerational.³⁷ White suggests that churches decide to be cultural missionaries, skew young, target men, prioritize children's ministry, cultivate a culture of invitation, disciple their mission, and find their secret sauce to reach every generation, the unchurched, and "religious nones."

Becoming a cultural missionary simply denotes using music, language, worship style, etc. to form a bridge of commonality with the unchurched. That initial bridge subsequently functions as the point of connection and communion which leads the prospective follower into the faith community. Margaret M. Mitchell says, "Paul represents himself here 1st Corinthians 9:19-23 as a conciliator, seeking to overcome cultural and ethnic divisions in order to bring people of all sorts into the one community of faith. In order to do this, he has made himself-a free man-into "a slave of all"³⁸

This decision is encapsulated in both the spirit and letter of Paul's approach to ministering to the Corinthians, by being all things to all people to save some.³⁹ Skewing Young is yet another decision that churches must make to attract children, youth, and new families especially when the church naturally skews older. This point represents the difficult time that aging congregations have had in attracting new members. Some of them have been unsuccessful, while others have been successful in this endeavor by hiring young staff, appointing younger people to leadership positions, position them to lead worship, and acknowledge the multi-faceted contributions that they make in the overall life of the church.

Strategies & Benefits of Reaching Children

³⁷White, James Emery. *Meet Generation Z*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2017

³⁸ Mitchell, Margaret. *Paul & The Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991, 134

³⁹ 1st Corinthians 9:22 (New King James Version)

Thriving intergenerational churches cannot advance without prioritizing Children's Ministry. The sad reality is that many churches merely give lip service towards their support of Children's Ministry. In many churches, new ministers are initially designated to serve in the Children & Youth Ministry while ample resources are not investment in the ministry. Geoff Surratt states that, "Since more than 85% of people who commit their lives to Christ do so as children and children are determining the church attendance of the entire family, the children's department should get a lion's share of the total budget."⁴⁰ Whereas I agree with Surratt that the children's ministry should be adequately funded to meet the spiritual, emotional, and relational needs of that demographic, I do believe that this objective can be accomplished without giving a lion share of the church budget to the Children's Ministry. If Children's Ministry is a priority it should be reflected in the church budget, talented staff should be recruited to lead the ministry, exceptional curriculum should be utilized, key investments should be made in infrastructure to ensure the children's space is safe/fun/inviting, and the children should be constantly showcased as a vital demographic within the overall life of the church. Craig Groeschel says, "If you don't plan generationally in your ministry, your church will age with you. And it will die right along with you too."⁴¹ The children are the future of the church, if the church does not invest ample resources, talents, and experiences in them, the church is destined to die once the older generation leaves church and/or the Earth.

Word of mouth has always been an effective marketing device for successful business, corporations, and churches. Another way of maximizing the benefits of word of

⁴⁰ Surratt, 84

⁴¹ Surratt, 86

mouth is by creating a culture of invitation. This occurs when members of the faith community are so spiritually, theologically, and relationally fulfilled by their local church that they constantly invite others to attend and join. Potential new members are not likely going to join a church that current members do not spread the word about. The foundation of creating this culture lies in ensuring that the church is firing on all cylinders in its pillars (Worship, Evangelism, Fellowship, Discipleship, and Missions). Many people use mailers, brochures, and vouchers to invite their family and friends to their local church. It is not the method that is utilized, but the mission that is accomplished by spreading the word about the church to invite others to experience a God encounter.

Discipling the mission is yet another strategic decision that churches must take to become intergenerational. James Emery White defines it as, “Developing your discipleship, first and foremost, around who it is you are trying to reach.”⁴² Too often churches do not gear their mission, methods, and moves to effectively reach their target audience. The entire mode of operations of a church should be geared toward who it is trying to reach. This type of discipleship has to concomitantly foster the spiritual formation of the current members while spiritually investing in the new converts as well.

Finding the “Secret Sauce” is yet another decision that every church that intends to be intergenerational must make. The ingredients behind the decisions should be the fact that the respective church has a clear, concise understanding of its mission. Churches that seek to do everything will not find its secret sauce. Those churches minor in precision and

⁴² White, 153

major in mediocrity. The mission or niche of the church should be the central driving force that catapults its efforts to be one church reaching multiple generations.

“Sticky” Characteristics of Intergenerational Churches

Intergenerational Churches that have found their niche and have become impressive and impactful have a “sticky” factor, there are certain attractional attributes about it that make people want to keep coming back. Cory Seibel states that, “Intergenerationally sticky churches are those that strive to encourage and enable people of all ages to connect with one another relationally.”⁴³ Sticky Churches prioritize relationship over religion. This is why they are able to reach diverse demographics and the unchurched. The life-giving relationships that are formed with sticky churches serve as the adhesive that create bonds between parishioners. These formidable bonds stand the test of time, trials, and transitions. The bonds allow parishioners to have access to other believers within their local faith community that will pray, support, and encourage them both in times of tribulation and celebration. These bonds also allow the youth to appreciate the wisdom of the older generation while allowing the older generation to appreciate the ingenuity of the younger generation. Raymond E. Brown states, “Through the way opened by Jesus, those whom the writer [author of the Epistle of Hebrews] calls “brothers” should enter the Holy Place by Jesus’ blood with faith, hope, and love, meeting together as a community.”⁴⁴ The formidable bonds that are formed within faith communities lend more credibility to the admonition of the anonymous writer of the epistle of Hebrews, which encourage us to not

⁴³ Allen, 256

⁴⁴ Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to The New Testament*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997, 688

forsake assembling together.⁴⁵ The fellowship amongst believers' kindles relationships, friendships, and partnerships.

Seibel writes, "Intergenerationally sticky churches employ structures that provide opportunities for people of different generations to foster relationships with one another."⁴⁶ Sticky Churches structure their spaces, ministries, and initiatives to create opportunities for members of different generations to foster relationships. It could be as simple redesigning the church narthex to look more like welcome center, where people can have conversations before or after worship or even designing a coffee hour after worship to foster fellowship across generations. Another structure that sticky churches utilize to foster relationships across generations is the different ministries of the overall church. Those ministries range from prison, outreach, human trafficking, mentoring, addiction recovery, financial freedom, marriage, and/or the music ministry. These ministries allow members of various generations to employ their spiritual gifts to edify the body of Christ, meet the needs of the wider community, and to serve alongside others both within and outside of their respective age group.

Seibel states that, "Intergenerationally sticky congregations learn to help the generations 'harmonize' their differences in ways that strengthen cohesion within the church."⁴⁷ Sticky Churches place a premium on harmony because they realize that difference is not inherently a bad thing. Creating harmony between the generations is complex considering that they have differences preferences, perspectives, and passions. Although this task is at times difficult, it is doable. When the generations are given an

⁴⁵ Hebrews 10:25 (New King James Version)

⁴⁶ Allen, 257

⁴⁷ Catterton, 258

opportunity to hear each other then they can more likely harmonize with each other. At that point they can appreciate each other without conforming to each other. They can more heartily acknowledge that there is more that unites them than divides them. This type of interpersonal unity amongst brethren, “all who belong to the family of God,”⁴⁸ is the catalyst of divine blessing which David uplifts.⁴⁹ James L. Mays states, “Zion is the place of ordained blessing, the place where the people of the Lord in their unity receive everlasting life. It is this abundant life, which Israel can receive only in its unity, and only from the Presence at this place that is the *summon bonum*.”⁵⁰ Unity can serve as the adhesive that connects the various generations, which will subsequently create human bonding and divine blessing.

Seibel states that, “Intergenerationally sticky churches are committed to paying attention to this affective dimension (empathy) and to finding ways to encourage people of different generations to develop empathy toward one another, thereby helping limited perceptions be transformed.”⁵¹ Sticky Churches resort to empathy as the gateway to understanding the differences of the generations, which foster conversation not criticism. It allows them to walk in the shoes of each other without judging the brand, size, color, and style of the shoe. This type of empathy fosters mutual understanding and unity amongst the generations.

Seibel aptly states that, “Intergenerationally sticky churches help people of all ages to engage with scriptures to discover a guiding vision of the responsibilities that they have

⁴⁸ Davidson, Robert. *The Vitality of Worship*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, 432

⁴⁹ Psalm 133:1-3 (New King James Version)

⁵⁰ Mays, James L. *Psalms*, Interpretation Bible Commentary, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, 414

⁵¹ Catterton, 259

to one another.”⁵² Sticky Churches enlighten its congregants that scripture, tradition, and experience illuminate that we have a responsibility not only to God, but also to each other. The generations have a divine responsibility to love, care, listen, support, and to serve each other. This realization discloses that although age divides us, responsibility unites us both the God and each other.

Seibel discloses that, “Intergenerationally sticky churches encourage people of different generations to value, honor, and receive one another’s gifts. They recognize the need to foster dynamics of power, mutuality, and equity that strengthen, rather than undermine, cohesion between the generations within the church.”⁵³ Sticky Churches challenge the generations what each person brings to the table. When people value each other’s gifts, talents, and abilities they began to appreciate each other and the walls of difference begin to fall. They also see each other are indispensable pieces of the puzzle of the kingdom of God. When they value each other and see each other as equals the relationship of enmity that age differences usually bring incrementally breeds a relationship of friendship, reliance, and togetherness.

Being intergenerational will be the litmus test of the longevity of a congregation beyond the present generation. We can no longer allow worship preferences and devotional practices to continue to divide the younger and older generations. Now is the time that the generations realize that they are better together; that they cannot fulfill the mission of Christ separate from each other. If we want the doors of our churches to remain vibrant beyond the present generation, our churches have to include all generations learning from each

⁵² Allen, 260

⁵³Allen, 261

other, listening to each other, valuing each other, loving each other, and serving alongside each other as vessels of honor⁵⁴ illuminating Jesus as the son of god, the gospel as the word of god, and the church as the hope of the world.

⁵⁴ 2nd Timothy 2:21 (New King James Version)

Progressive Pastoral Leadership

“So, you told me you were a full-time Pastor when I asked you what you do for a living. So, what exactly do you do during the week then?”

This question like many other similar ones represents common misconceptions about the role and responsibilities of a pastor. Some people view the role as a one day-a-week position that requires the pastoral leader to oversee worship, issue the morning greeting, reiterate pertinent announcements, administer the sacraments, give the sermon, and then pronounce the benediction. The core of the initial question also represents an ongoing debate as it relates to whether being a pastor is a profession or a vocation. The range of answers vary from being a pastor is like a regular job that one does to earn a living, to being a pastor is something that one is called to do while having the accompanying gifts/skillsets to perform duties which brings a sense of fulfillment, to being a pastor is a career in which one has ascertained the proper training, credentials, and education to spend 20-30 years making a mark in that particular field. While the answers vary, I would say that the answer is not either/or; the answer is both/and. The role and responsibilities of being a pastor is both a vocation and a profession.

Richard Lischer states, “Theologically, what distinguishes a vocation from the rigors of a profession is this: you have to die to enter a vocation. A profession summons the best from you. A vocation calls you away from what you thought was best in you, purifies it, and promises to make you something or someone you are not yet.”¹ Lischer draws a line of demarcation between a profession and a vocation, while simultaneously demonstrating how ministry entails aspects of both, you are required to acquire the proper

¹ Lischer, Richard. *The End of Words*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005, 30

credentials to flow efficaciously in your craft while the role also has a supernatural way of transforming you from the inside out.

Unfortunately, this particular role has lost the sense of reverence and esteem that it once had in previous generations if the findings of a poll by Gallup and the Associated Press-NORC Center are correct. There findings report that only 36% of Americans view clergy favorable and only 52% of regular churchgoers consider clergy as trustworthy.² This is not surprising considering how reality television, social media, and television have broadcast the ethical scandals, financial maleficence, and sexual improprieties of a host of pastoral leaders in the last decade and beyond. The resurgence of the prosperity gospel made matters worse. This particular theology suggests that one's physical, material, and financial status is a visible representation of the authenticity of one's relationship with God.³ The teachers of prosperity gospel made themselves visible manifestations of the material prosperity that they taught. These pastors wore tailor-made suits, owned multiple luxury cars, lived in multi-million-dollar homes, and taught their adherents that health, wealth, and prosperity is the life that God destined for them to have— if they had enough faith to believe it and receive it.

The realities listed above have unfortunately veiled the true meaning of pastoral ministry and has overshadowed the innumerable contributions of the faithful pastoral leaders who accepted this call to exclusively bring good to others and glory to God. Approximately 60% of African-American pastors are bi-vocational.⁴ Most pastors do not

² “Public Esteem for Military Still High,” Pew Forum, 11 July. 2013

³ Walton, Jonathan L. *Watch This! The Ethics & Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, NYU Press, 2009, 94

⁴ National Congregations Study 2015 (The National Opinion Research Center)

have national notoriety, live extravagant lifestyles, or have megachurches. It should also be noted that the role and responsibilities of being a pastor goes beyond the Sunday morning worship experience. William H. Willimon portrays how the singular role of pastor entails multitudinous roles which include the pastor functioning at times as a priest, interpreter of scripture, preacher, counselor, teacher, evangelist, prophet, lead missionary, and as a leader.⁵ The responsibilities include planning worship, preparing sermons/teachings, working with key personnel to plan the church annual budget, visiting the infirm, burying the dead, officiating weddings, administrative duties, moderating church meetings, casting the vision, and preaching/teaching the Gospel. While this list of responsibilities range based on denomination/local parish and is not exhaustive, it represents several key responsibilities of pastors.

Although the role of being a pastor is marred with misconceptions and even disdain, there is an authentic hunger both in the church and community for progressive pastoral leadership. This type of pastoral leadership aims to meet the multi-faceted needs of parishioners, simultaneously have an impact in the church/community/culture, reach multiple generations with the Gospel, take an unapologetic stand for social justice, promote unity amongst diverse faith groups, and to use the faith community as the platform by which justice, equality, and brotherhood is promoted throughout society. The majority of pastors aspire to make an impact in the church, an investment in the community, and an imprint in the culture. This particular endeavor is usually accomplished by pastoral leaders who have a clear, concise understanding of the “why” behind their “what”. One could

⁵ Willimon, William H. *Pastor: The Theology & Practice of Ordained Ministry*, Abingdon, Nashville, 2016

appropriately inquire what are some of the metrics that could be utilized to evaluate the aims of progressive pastoral leadership? I would submit that there is no universal metric that could evaluate it, but I would suggest that vision, leadership development, and succession are key components of progressive pastoral leadership.

Vision

King Solomon in the book of Proverbs states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”⁶ “The word vision comes from the Hebrew word *chazown* (pronounced khaw-zone’). It means “dream” or “revelation” or “vision” The word perish comes from the Hebrew word *para* (pronounced paw-rah’). It means to cast off restraints, to let loose, to let go, or to go completely out of control.”⁷ From the etymological analysis listed above we can deduct that vision is the divine mechanism that provides structure, clarity, and direction. The absence of it yields chaos, opaqueness, and bewilderment.

Vision functions as an essential characteristic of progressive pastoral leadership. The vision that God has divinely implanted in the pastoral leader serves as the plan which sets the priorities, establishes the goal posts, and charts the course for the respective faith community.

George Barna defines vision as, “A clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to his chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstances.”⁸ Vision according to Barna’s definition is a mental conceptualization of a future that is distinct from the present. Although it commences as a

⁶ Proverbs 29:18 (King James Version)

⁷ Groeschel, Craig. *Chazown*, Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, 2006, 8-9

⁸ Barna, George. *The Power of Vision*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1992, 26-27

mental picture it culminates into a visible reality. Andy Stanley states that, “Vision often begins with the inability to accept things the way they are. Over time that dissatisfaction matures into a clear picture of what could be.”⁹ Stanley suggests that one of the central catalysts of vision is not accepting what is as what always shall be. Vision necessitates courage to look the “right now” in the face and propose the “not yet” as an alternative. It projects a promising future as an alternative to the systems, structures, and standards of the present. Vision is a gift from God to the pastoral leader to manifest God’s plan and path in the life of the given faith community.

It takes exceptional courage and intuition for pastor and people to collectively discern vision for the given congregation considering that it is not always met with affirmation, it challenges the congregation to envision the balance between continuity/change, and it mandates that the given congregation prioritize its ministries, mission, and money to bring the vision into reality. Making the vision into a reality is complex given that fear and complacency on the part of the leader and/or the laity (i.e., especially as a result of major endeavors like commencing an expensive capital campaign, revamping the Music Ministry, or changing the church bylaws) can function as a major obstruction to vision. The collective discernment of the leader and the laity can be the key for triumphing over the common obstacles that traditionally block the implementation of God-given vision for a particular congregation. Although there is a host of common obstacles to implementing vision, Andy Stanley aptly notes that tradition and short-term thinking are the main inhibitors of vision within a church, organization, or company. Andy Stanley states that, “One of the most popular and devastating barriers to true vision is the

⁹ Stanley, Andy. *Visioneering*, Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, 1990, 17

notion that God would never cause you to change what you have always done before.”¹⁰ Tradition continually functions as a barrier to vision because many people are not open to change, prefer to do everything the same way, and visualize veering from tradition as something that would diminish the mission of the particular organization and take the organization in a direction that erases the accomplishments of the past. Andy Stanley states that, “The world is hard on a vision. After all, a vision is about change. And change is not welcomed in most arenas of life.”¹¹ Although tradition is frequently viewed through a pejorative lens, it is not inherently a bad thing, which means it is not an automatic inhibitor of vision. Tradition gives an organization a sense of its history, mission, and trajectory. Vision does not necessarily erase that; it utilizes it as the substratum for accomplishing additional victories in the future. Tradition becomes an inhibitor to vision (i.e., when tradition morphs into traditionalism), when the church members lack initiative to achieve additional feats in the future because they are resting on the laurels of their past. The Apostle Paul warned his favorite congregation, the church at Philippi, to forget those things that are behind and reach forward to those things which are ahead.”¹² John MacArthur states that, “Paul had reduced the whole of sanctification to the simple and clear goal of doing “one thing”-pursuing Christlike-ness. The believer therefore must refuse to rely on past virtuous deeds and achievements in ministry. To be distracted by the past debilitates one’s efforts in the present.”¹³ Paul was not admonishing the Philippians to downplay the victories of their past; he was actually instructing them to not allow those victories to create

¹⁰ *Visioneering*, 115

¹¹ *Visioneering*, 21

¹² Philippians 3:13 (New King James Version)

¹³ *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1722

a sense of complacency, whereby they halt striving for additional achievements in their future. Pastors frequently have a hard time selling the vision to some members because they perpetually marvel at the “good ole days of the past” which hamstring their ability to envision bigger, better, and brighter days in the future.

George Barna states that individuals engaged in the vision inhibitor of short-term thinking, “Deplete the past to enjoy the present at the expense of the future”¹⁴ The past is not inherently detrimental when it is seen as the springboard to future trajectories and triumphs. The pastoral leader who successfully implements vision has to inspire the congregation that the projected future does not abrogate the past, but sets the stage for a new direction which will bring additional victory and success in the future. Faith communities have to be continually challenged by progressive pastoral leaders to take appropriate steps to sustain the longevity of the church in the future by thinking with the future in mind. When they view the church mission exclusively as meeting their present needs, aspirations, and desires they inadvertently ignore what the future of the organization will look like when they are gone and the next generation comes along. One of the ways of moving members beyond short-term thinking is to persuade them that vision is bigger than any individual, season, or the particular organization.

Andy Stanley precisely states that, “There will always be a correlation between what God has put in an individual’s heart to do and what he is up to in the world at large.”¹⁵ This reality further lifts the fact that vision is bigger than one person. Vision has a direct connection between what God is accomplishing in an individual and what he seeks to

¹⁴ *The Power of Vision*, 121

¹⁵ *Visioneering*, 26

accomplish in society. This reality should be the fire that enflames the hearts of faith communities to continually discern how what God aspires to do in them is connected to what God aspires to do in the world.

Vision remains a key facet of progressive pastoral leadership because it continually challenges the pastoral leader to challenge their respective faith community to not accept the status quo, settle for conventionality, or go along just to get along. Vision disturbs the norm and cause the church to reimagine new approaches, trajectories, and possibilities that it can reach to accomplish its mission, in the present, but especially in the future. It takes this level of vision to challenge a traditional institutional church that is declining in membership, morale, and money to reimagine steps it can take to have a promising future. This level of vision is needed to challenge the church to take bold, innovative steps to reverse decline, embrace innovation, and experience growth. A compelling, captivating vision could inspire a church to invest substantial financial resources into the community, align its annual expenditures with its foundational mission, prioritize environmental justice by upgrading the infrastructure of the building to be L.E.E.D. (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, take the lead in improving relations between law enforcement/communities of color, challenge local governments to implement progressive policies (i.e., raising the minimum wage, paid sick leave, criminal justice reform, expanding mental health services, and making community college free). Vision functions as the foundational mechanism by which pastoral leaders can “color outside the lines” of traditional roles of faith communities within society. Audacious vision functions as the lifeline that can revive a dying church, allow the church to attain a positive platform in the

community, and make an indelible impact within society. The next leg of this three-legged stool of progressive pastoral leadership is leadership development.

Leadership Development

John C. Maxwell states, “By definition, for someone to be a leader, he or she must have followers. If you think you’re leading but no one is following you, then you’re only taking a walk.”¹⁶ Too often being a leader is merely viewed as being an individual who possess a title, position, rank, or status. You can have a title, position, rank, and status, but still not be a leader. Leadership at its core is not defined by a title, it is defined by influence, the ability to inspire individuals to follow the vision, values, and virtues that you seek to implement. This notion is further adjudicated in *The Law of Influence*, which states that, “The true meaning of leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less.”¹⁷ You are not an actual leader if people have not been inspired to follow you and progressively grow to trust you to develop them into an effectual leader.

True leadership is defined by having influence, inspiring others to follow you, and effectively completing the task even when you do not have a title. This latter aspect of authentic leadership reminds me of the admonition of the Apostle Paul to his mentee, Timothy in his second epistle to him, to do the work of an evangelist.¹⁸ John MacArthur states, “Paul did not call Timothy to the office of an evangelist, but to “do the work” of one.”¹⁹ Even those who affirm belief in the *Five-Fold Ministry Gifts* outlined in Ephesians 4:11 acknowledge that the role of the pastor is distinct from the role of an evangelist. The

¹⁶ Maxwell, John C. *LeaderShift*, Harper Collins Leadership, New York City, 2019, 228

¹⁷ *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 11

¹⁸ 2nd Timothy 4:5 (New King James Version)

¹⁹ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2005, 1813-1814

pastor is obligated to foster the spiritual formation of a congregation for a particular space and time. The evangelist functions as the individual who travels from place to place to spread the Gospel both to believers and unbelievers, without having an obligation to stay at one particular locale. Paul's request of Timothy in the citation above functions as a teachable moment in the area of leadership. Timothy could simultaneously pastor the Church of Ephesus while doing the work of an evangelist (i.e., spreading the Gospel abroad). When it comes to leadership it is possible to do the work, without having the title. John C. Maxwell states, "The only thing a title can buy is a little time-either to increase your level of influence with others or to erase it."²⁰ Too often individuals claim to be leaders because they have the title, but they lack the accompanying work to substantiate the title. Progressive pastoral leaders have influence, get the job done, and use their platform to develop others into effective leaders.

Pastors seeking to reverse the cycle of decline within their congregation should understand that developing leaders is a key essential to accomplish such a feat. Having an audacious vision which inspires the congregation to reimagine what could be and that it should be is not enough. Every pastor needs key leaders that they develop to come alongside them to partner in the process of making the vision into a reality. James Emery White states, "The more leaders you develop, the more leaders you unleash. The more leaders are unleashed, the more the church reaches its full redemptive potential."²¹ Traditional models of pastoral ministry emphasized developing disciples, while it is important that they continue to develop their flock into being fully-devoted disciples of

²⁰ *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 14

²¹ White, James Emery. *What They Didn't Teach You in Seminary*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2011, 170

Christ, they also must develop leaders. This model of pastoral ministry is not independent, but interdependent. The Hebrew canonical prophet, Habakkuk elucidates the fact that the implementation of vision is interdependent.²² The minor prophet surmises that not only must someone write the vision (the pastoral leader), someone else must run with the vision (the key leaders within the laity).²³ This model of interdependent ministry is effective and impactful because it invites the spiritual gifts, skillsets, and abilities of a collective group to accomplish a singular goal (vision).

The lone ranger approach to revitalizing a congregation experiencing decline will not be effective, because although the pastor may discern accurately God’s vision, he/she does not have all the answers, gifts, or resources to bring the vision into fruition. Taking intentional opportunities to develop leaders could mean one-on-one meetings, participating in service projects, attending leadership retreats, commencing a monthly book club, crafting the annual action steps of the vision together, or going to leadership development seminars.

Pastoral leaders have the potential to develop prospective leaders in their congregations to realize their promise and that God will use them despite their deficiencies. Samuel R. Chand states that, “One of the most enduring and endearing truths in the Bible is that God is more than willing to use flawed people to accomplish his purposes. That’s a good thing because none of the other kind is available!”²⁴ Budding leaders have to understand that perfection is not God’s standard, but a teachable spirit is the key to growth.

²² The John MacArthur Bible Commentary, 1031

²³ Habakkuk 2:2 (New King James Version)

²⁴ Chand, Samuel R. *Leadership Pain*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2015, 167

Pastoral leaders have to develop the character, potential, integrity, discipline, compassion, and resilience in the leaders they will entrust to both assist in carrying out the vision and leading other lay members within the congregation.

When pastoral leaders undergo the process of developing leaders within the congregation, they will realize that leadership is not as sexy, facile, and amenity laden as it seems to be. Gold is tried in the furnace of fire. Leaders are tried and proven in the crucible of adversity, uncertainty, and failure. God develops us the most during abased seasons of despair, disappointment, defeat. The testing seasons develop resilience, instill humility, and embed courage in leaders. Samuel R. Chand states, “As long as we see failure, stress, and difficulties as intruders, we’ll fail to let them teach us, shape us, and strengthen us. When we expect God to use pain in our lives to sift us, prune us, and build us, we’ll have the tenacity it takes to endure hard times.”²⁵ This reality should develop both a sense of solidarity and empathy by the key leaders for the pastoral leader, and it should be a teachable experience that illumines the fact that difficulties are the greatest developers of good leaders. It should also change the perspective of the leaders that are being developed. Failure, difficulty, and adversity should not be seen as obstacles to defeat them, but as opportunities to develop them. Pastoral Leaders should endeavor to be transformational leaders that, “Influence people to think, speak, and act in ways that make a positive difference in their lives and the lives of others. That kind of leadership can change the world!”²⁶ Pastoral Leaders devoted to reversing cycles of decline within their

²⁵ *Leadership Pain*, 196

²⁶ *LeaderShift*, 215

respective congregations should aspire to develop key leaders who will transform not only the church, but also the world.

Whereas vision and leadership development functions as the two legs on the stool of progressive pastoral leadership; succession functions as the third leg of the stool.

Pastoral Succession

William Vanderbloeman states, “Today more than in any other time on record, pastors are anticipating their own succession. And they are not merely beginning to talk openly about it; their awareness of a future transition is also shaping how they do ministry today.”²⁷ Pastoral Succession was not a widely discussed topic in the black Baptist churches in which I was raised in as a child or when I became a young adult. Pastors were usually in their mid-50’s to late-70’s, they usually became incapacitated, died in office or an assistant pastor, associate minister replaced them upon retirement. The 2000’s showcased a host of younger pastors in their 30’s taking the helm of historic Baptist, Pentecostal, and non-denominational churches.²⁸ Today we are witnessing more pastors discussing, preparing, and commencing their respective succession processes.

Dave Travis defines pastoral succession as, “The intentional process of the transfer of leadership, power, and authority from one directional leader to another.” This is a process that the Millennial Generation of pastoral leaders should aspire to successfully undergo to secure their legacy and to preserve the longevity of the faith-communities that they serve. John C. Maxwell candidly states, “Every leader eventually leaves the organization-one way or another. He may change jobs, get promoted, or retire. And even

²⁷ Vanderbloeman, William & Bird, Warren. *NEXT*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2014, 9

²⁸ Gary V. Simpson, Christianity Today, “Big Shoes to Fill”, 19 May. 2004

if a person refuses to retire, he (she) is going to die.”²⁹ No matter what the circumstance or context may be, the key leader will not be at the organization forever, they will ultimately leave and the organization will need to be able to function fruitfully upon their departure. Pastoral succession functions as the third leg of the stool of Progressive Pastoral Leadership because the destiny of the congregation is not inherently tied to the pastoral leader, God never intended for the doors of the church to close when the eyes of the respective leader close, this is why leadership development is necessary and pastoral succession is imperative. H.B. Charles Jr. elucidates this point when he states, “A ministry that lasts beyond you (pastoral leader) requires that you develop young leaders to whom you can hand the baton at some point.”³⁰ Pastoral succession has become a more widely discussed topic within our churches because too often our churches have experienced significant decline, detrimental infighting, and litigation disputes because young leaders were not groomed in advance to succeed the outgoing pastoral leader.

Pastoral Succession is not merely about a pastor enjoying retirement, it is about raising up new leaders, preserving the legacy of the pastor, and ensuring that the church has a bright future in the days to come. John C. Maxwell states, “Achievement comes to someone when he is able to do great things for himself. Success comes when he empowers followers to do great things with him. Significance comes when he develops leaders to do great things for him. But a legacy is created when a person puts his organization into the position to do great things without him.”³¹ Authentic ministry is not merely judged by how well the church did during the tenure of the pastor, but how it excelled after the departure

²⁹ *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 222

³⁰ Charles Jr, H.B. *On Pastoring*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2016, 85

³¹ *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 221

of the pastor. This quote represents an ideal that pastors seek to achieve, to aspire for their respective congregations to thrive after their departure, but it fails to take into account circumstances beyond the pastor's control (i.e., an economic downturn, a global pandemic, gentrification, the growing number of religious "nones", the growing secularization of America, or failure to reach Millennials/Generation Z) which could potentially derail a successful succession process. Certain foundational perspectives must be ingrained within the prospective pastoral leader who aspires to achieve it. Some but not all of them include: the vision is bigger than any one person, there are no permanent pastors only interim pastors, new leaders must be groomed to carry the ministry forward, and the longevity of the ministry in the future must be prioritized above the glory days of its past/present.

Grey Matter Research & Consulting reports that, "The average senior pastor tenure per church is 8 years, a number that has inched upward over the years. The average senior pastor career is 18 years, which suggests the typical pastors faces succession two or more times."³² This statistic applies to 101 pastors interviewed, whose denominational composition included: 27% (non-denominational), 22% Southern Baptist, 12% Wesleyan, 11% Presbyterian Church of America, 11% Evangelical Free Church, 9% Other Baptist, 4% Nazarene, and 4% United Methodist congregations. This statistic disclosing that the average pastoral tenure is exceptionally shorter than one would usually think it is. If this is the case the average tenure is eight years, why do some pastors stay so long (30, 40, 50 years) while failing to execute a plan for pastoral succession? Vanderbloeman and Bird states, "To put it bluntly, too often pastors stay at a church not because they're thriving

³² Grey Matter Research and Consulting, "Study Shows Why Protestant Clergy Change Jobs-Promotions Are A More Common Cause than God's Call," September 7, 2005,

there, but because their identity is tied too much to their present role and they don't have anything else to put their passion into."³³ I agree with the credibility of this quote while simultaneously disagreeing to an extent. In actuality, some pastors stay because they see their role and their identity as one. Then some pastors stay because of financial, organizational, and other relational reasons. This is a fitting answer as it relates to why some pastors refuse to pursue succession. When a pastor does not have a firm sense of their identity outside of the faith community they lead and the title that they have, they experience a loss of who they are. Other pastors do not pursue succession because they cannot see the future of the church beyond their tenure, while others continually postpone the process until it is nearer or actually too late. It should also be noted that many pastors do not pursue succession because they have not properly prepared for retirement. The reasons for the lack of preparation for retirement could range from procrastination to financial hardships to not recognizing life after retirement as a priority.³⁴

The reasons above offer a cursory explanation for why some pastors stay too long and fail to execute a well-crafted plan to set themselves and their respective church up for succession. One of the most common modes of succession within the black church is to keep the church in the family; the son/nephew/wife/daughter succeeds the father after retirement or death.

I frequently ponder about what could happen if pastors who reached the peak of their respective tenures took strategic steps to position a successor to ensure their ministry thrived beyond the prime of their tenure. This notion comes to mind, when I remember the

³³ Vanderbloeman & Bird, 43

³⁴ Vanderbloeman & Bird, 40

ministry of one of the trailblazing pastors in the city of Chicago, the late Rev. James A. Murphy, Sr. (Rose of Sharon Community Church).³⁵ He was one of the first black pastors in Chicago to have a live Sunday Morning broadcast and telecast. He left Grenada, Mississippi to start Rose of Sharon in 1950. He had an exceptional legacy as a pastor, community activist, entrepreneur, and real estate broker. He pastored the church for 62 years. Although the church accomplished exceptional feats in worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and outreach the latter end of his tenure initiated a decline in his health and the size of the congregation. During the latter decades of his tenure the membership declined, they failed to reach Millennials, the building outsized the congregation, the building was sold before his death, and the church relocated to a smaller edifice in the western suburbs of Chicago (Maywood, IL). I wonder if he avoided pastoral succession because he suffered from founder's syndrome. What would the current status of the congregation be if he set up his ministry in such a way that he could have retired 15-20 years earlier. These salient questions are inherently built on assumptions that pastoral succession is predominately the responsibility of the pastor, the pastor did not want to retire from ministry, the church would have supported his decision to install a successor, and that the church would have excelled if a successful succession process took place. This story functions as an object lesson which elucidates to me that pastoral succession will not always lead to the continued success of the church, succession is not always embraced by the laity, and that the future success of the church could be determined by metrics other than money, membership, and ministries.

³⁵ "Chicago Pastor James A. Murphy Dies at 87," The Chicago Crusader, 27 April. 2018

Regardless of the common inhibitors listed above, the Millennial generation of pastors have to get pastoral succession right. Getting pastoral succession is not limited to, but entails planning ahead, starting a retirement plan at the commencement of ministry, developing key leaders, grooming Associate Ministers, consulting with leadership experts, and preparing their respective churches to see a future beyond them. Millennial Pastors have a number of successful models within recent memory that they can learn from. As a native Chicagoan, I have had the opportunity to witness some major pastoral successions at prominent churches in the city and had the opportunity to speak with the successors about the challenges and success of their respective pastoral successions.

The late Bishop Arthur M. Brazier served as the Senior Pastor of Apostolic Church of God (Chicago, IL) for 48 years. He assumed the pastorate with 100 members in 1960 and ultimately grew the congregation to 18,000 during his 48-year tenure. Bishop Brazier was a renowned pastor, activist, community developer, and civic leader during his nearly five-decade tenure, within the city of Chicago. He named his son Rev. Dr. Byron T. Brazier as his successor four years before his retirement. During that process he groomed his son for the pastorate and his son also had the advantage of serving as the Assistant Pastor for over a decade. During our meeting in May 2018, he shared that the first few years of his transition were difficult considering the departure of some leaders who were loyal to his father, the reduction in attendance/giving, and his continual challenge of demonstrating his continual commitment to affordable housing in the Woodlawn community while maintaining a working relationship with the University of Chicago. The forthcoming Obama Presidential Library was another challenge he had to navigate considering that although it would bring economic development, it could potentially lead to gentrification

and displacement.³⁶ Dr. Brazier became the pastor in 2008 and has since continued the legacy of Bishop Brazier and the mission of Apostolic Church of God.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. the pastor-emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ (Chicago, IL) served as the pastor for 36 years upon retirement. During his tenure the church membership grew from 90 to 8,000. He used his theological convictions to position his ministry to promote social justice, equality, and freedom. Dr. Wright chose his successor Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III (Augusta, Georgia) and mentored him over a five-year period to assume the position upon his retirement in 2008. As a member of Trinity, I can attest that the church has grown in its membership, social justice initiatives, and impact within the wider community during Dr. Moss tenure. This model is unique because a formal pastoral search process would have been initiated by Trinity in coordination with the United Churches of Christ denomination, but in this instance, Dr. Wright chose his successor. Based on conversations with Dr. Moss, the transition was a multi-faceted endeavor. During my interview with Dr. Moss in December 2020, he shared that at that juncture in his ministry (when Dr. Wright was planning for retirement) he himself was pastoring Tabernacle Baptist Church (Augusta, Ga) he was considering whether or not to succeed his father (Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church) or to succeed Dr. Wright. Moss shared that the five-year transition allowed him to bond with Dr. Wright, learn the history/culture of Trinity, build key relationships, and craft his own visionary blueprint for the church. He notes that the navigating the church through *The Jeremiah Wright Controversy*³⁷ was one of the most challenging periods of his pastorate, but it

³⁶ Pete Saunders, Bloomberg Opinion, "Gentrification Is A Problem Even When It Isn't", 27 October. 2020

³⁷ Brian Ross & Rehab El-Buri, ABC News "Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11," 7May.2008

provided him a platform to exemplify resilient leadership while summoning the congregation to believe in its history, despite a few ABC News clips of some of Wright's controversial sermons.

Rev. Charles Jenkins served as the Senior Pastor of the historic Fellowship Baptist Church (Chicago, IL) for 20 years (2000-2020). He succeeded his mentor, Rev. Clay Evans who founded and pastored the church from 1950-2000. Rev. Evans mentored Jenkins for two years and then took on the role as Pastor-Emeritus upon Jenkins succession as pastor. During Jenkins tenure, the congregation grew to 10,000 parishioners, dozens of new ministries were established to meet the needs of the congregation/community, and the nationally renowned *Fellowship Choir* won multiple Stellar Awards. In 2019, Pastor Jenkins announced that he would retire from the pastorate and recruited Rev. Reginald W. Sharpe, Jr. (Lithonia, Georgia) to serve as his successor. This model of pastoral succession is extraordinary on multiple fronts considering that it represents two successful cycles of succession, the pastor selected the successor, the successor comes from outside of the congregation, the successor is a Millennial, but also because Jenkins retired way before the typical retirement age (44 years old) of Senior Pastors of historic black church. Sharpe tenure has been successful, he has continued the mission/ministries of Fellowship, the congregation continue to reach Millennials/the unchurched, and this model of succession has inspired tons of pastors to replicate it within their own church when they approach retirement. During my *Facebook Messenger* interview with him in April 2020, he noted that his grooming at Greater Travelers Rest (Decatur, GA) under the leadership of Dr. E. Dewey Smith prepared him for pastoral ministry while navigating a global pandemic at the beginning his tenure has presented its share of challenges, adjustments, and opportunities,

he remains optimistic about his potential to position Fellowship to reach generations to come.

The three models listed above, which I have observed and garnered insight after having conversations with the respective successors, serve as paradigms that pastoral leaders can learn from as they begin to think about pastoral succession. These models and those similar to them are imperative now, more than ever considering that many of the major prominent black pastors in the United States are 50-75 years old and are approaching the reality of retirement. Bishop TD Jakes (Dallas, TX), Bishop Paul S. Morton (Atlanta, GA), Bishop Noel Jones (Gardena, CA), Pastor John K. Jenkins (Upper Marlboro, PA), Bishop Walter S. Thomas, Sr. (Baltimore, MD), Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson (Mt. Vernon, NY), Dr. Frederick D. Haynes, III (Dallas, TX), Dr. Ralph D. West, Sr. (Houston, TX), Dr. Walter Malone (Louisville, KY), Dr. Joe S. Ratliff (Houston, TX), Pastor Jerry D. Black (Decatur, GA), Pastor Terry K. Anderson (Houston, TX), Dr. Calvin O. Butts, III (Harlem, NY), Dr. DeForest Soaries (Somerset, NJ), Dr. John Adolph (Beaumont, TX), Dr. Alyn E. Waller (Philadelphia, PA), and Dr. Kevin W. Cosby (Louisville, KY) are some of the most prominent black pastoral leaders who understand that a successful pastoral succession process is imperative to preserve their church and seal their respective legacies.

John C. Maxwell offers an intriguing conclusion of this discussion about pastoral succession when he talks about the importance of legacy. Maxwell states, “When all is said and done, your ability as a leader will not be judged by what you achieved personally or even what your team accomplished during your tenure. Your ability as a leader will be

judged by how well your people and your organization did after you were gone.”³⁸ Whereas I agree with spirit behind Maxwell’s thought, I disagree because it does not take into account for the possibility of variables outside of the outgoing pastor’s control (i.e., the incoming pastor suffering a major moral failure, an economic recession that has an adverse effect on the church finances, etc.) which could actually have a detrimental impact on the organization after the pastor’s departure. It also assumes that the future success of the church is inherently dependent on the pastor and not the church leadership, divine providence, or laity participation.

Therefore, doing everything possible to ensure the success of the organization after your departure should be viewed as a supreme ideal, not as an indisputable barometer of the outgoing pastor’s success. This is why vision and leadership development combined with pastoral succession are indispensable factors of Progressive Pastoral Leadership because legacy is not established individually or immediately, but incrementally by having a concise plan which charts a promising future for an organization and raises up like-minded leaders who are disciplined, devoted, and determined to carry out that plan both with you and without you.

³⁸ *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 224

Conclusion

This Doctor of Ministry requirement is more than a dissertation, project, or assignment. I have grown to embrace it as a progressive journey of spiritual formation, intentional introspection, and emotional development. Although other models have been proposed previously to address decline in urban congregations, I believe my model represents a method by which continuity and change were incorporated to address decline. The church cannot allow the growing secularization of America, the growing number of religious “nones”, and distrust of religious institutions to discourage it from spreading the message of the Gospel and reaching everyone possible for Christ. This endeavor given the odds is difficult, but it is also doable. It is feasible because we have the continual presence of God within us and we have innumerable resources amongst us to tackle decline.

The Black Church can begin to reach others through social justice, by taking a vibrant stand to fight against injustice, oppression, and marginalization whether that is in the area of policy, policing, or procedures which prevent people from experiencing justice and equality. Social Justice is a key area where we can build a sense of solidarity with our neighbors who live in communities that have been decimated by poverty, unemployment, gun violence, underfunded schools, crime, substance abuse, mental trauma, and lack of access to municipal services. We become the hands and feet of Jesus when we take the hands and hearts of the marginalized into ours to improve the quality of life for impoverished people in inner-cities.

Prophetic Preaching is yet another way the church can address decline and engage the community. This method of preaching utilizes the pulpit as the platform to challenge the status quo, speak up for justice, and reveal God’s vision for the *beloved community* in

communities that are inundated with despair, misery, and sorrow. The prophetic word not only challenge the governmental system and central power brokers within society, but it also challenges the church to live up to the standard that it professes, so that it can be a beacon light in a dark world. This mode of preaching refuse to accept the deficiencies of the “right now” because it envisions the possibilities of the “not yet”.

Missional Stewardship challenges the church to ensure that the way it accounts and appropriates its money is actually in alignment with its mission. This mode challenges the church to work to become self-sufficient from a financial standpoint so that it can develop the platform to make key financial investments in the community, promote social good, and create partnership with other organizations to address social ills that it cannot adequately address independently.

Intergenerational Ministry uniquely emphasizes reaching Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-2012)¹ so that the church does not find itself on its last generational leg. This mode does not seek to push the Boomers to the periphery, but seek to create a model in which one church can reach multiple generations, while honoring the unique preferences, passions, and perspectives that they represent in the overall culture of the faith community. This section of the revitalization model in this project forces the church to confront ageism, traditionalism head on to ultimately overcome those common obstructions that prevent the church from bridging the gap between generations.

Progressive Pastoral Leadership uplifts the unique role and responsibilities that God has given pastors to fulfill. Vision is one leg of this three-legged stool of progressive pastoral leadership. Vision is the divine blueprint that the leader and laity have discerned

¹ Michael Dimock, Pew Research, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End & Gen Z Begins," 17 Jan 2019.

collectively as the path that God envision the church to take into the future. Vision refuses to accept the status quo, but continually projects forward, progress, and movement. Leadership Development is the second leg of this three-legged stool of progressive pastoral leadership. God has called pastors to develop other leaders within the laity to deputize responsibilities, foster their spiritual formation, edify the body of Christ, and expand their leadership potential. Pastoral Succession is the last leg of this three-legged stool of progressive pastoral leadership. Pastors are challenged here to prepare themselves for when they retire from ministry and to equip the church to the best of their ability to succeed upon their departure. Succession functions as a mandatory task that modern Millennial pastors have to excel in to preserve their legacy and to promote the longevity of the church. Various successful succession models have been carried out within the black church in the last two decades. Although succession is one task millennial pastors aspire to succeed in, they have to ultimately look beyond the lens of statistics, planning, and grooming, they have to see it through the lens of faith. You have to see succession through the lens of faith because despite the meticulous planning of the pastoral leader there are a multitude of variables that will affect whether or not their succession transition will go well and/or whether the church continue to grow after they are replaced. Therefore, the pastor should plan, strategize, and consult, but must also pray boldly and trust God completely because the results are ultimately in the hands of God.

It is my prayer that this model can be found to be a helpful tool to assist any church in its effort to address decline. If that is possible, I know that this effort was not in vain and that ultimately it brought good to humankind and glory to the divine!

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