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# Social policy, social action and the Black Church: a praxis for social vision

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SOCIAL POLICY, SOCIAL ACTION AND THE BLACK CHURCH:  
A PRAXIS FOR SOCIAL VISION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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By  
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## Abstract

Given the nature of the current political, social, and economic climates in the United States with home foreclosures, jobless rates, and high-school dropout rates hovering around record numbers, those who are indigenous to the plight of the people must play a role in securing policies and actions that will support better opportunities for better living. The faith community, especially the Black Church, can play a role by engaging in the development and maintenance of social policy and a responsibility to engage in social action that will energize and empower people in order to improve the quality of living.

While there has been much time and effort dedicated to connecting the Black Church with social action, there is not a particularly large body of work encouraging the engagement of the Black Church in social policy. In order to address the need to have a relevant and substantial voice that will direct policies that will eradicate problems rather than always addressing consequences; the Black Church must allow the space for critical, analytical, and strategic treatment of the issues.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since its inception the Black church has played a major role in shaping the lives of not only parishioners of a particular group but entire communities.

I intend to argue that the people who are a part similar religious culture – shared religious rituals and rhetoric (especially the Black Church) - have a role in the development and maintenance of social policy and a responsibility to engage in social action that will energize and empower people in order to improve the quality of living. Given the nature of the current political, social, and economic climates in the United States with home foreclosures, jobless rates, and high-school dropout rates hovering around record numbers, those who are indigenous to the plight of the people must play a role in securing policies and actions that will support better opportunities for better living.

While there has been much time and effort dedicated to connecting the Black Church with social action, there is not a particularly large body of work encouraging the engagement of the Black Church in social policy. In order to address the need to have a relevant and substantial voice that will direct policies that will eradicate problems rather than always addressing consequences; the Black Church must allow the space for critical, analytical, and strategic treatment of the issues.

This “call to arms” is based on the church’s profession to keep the commands and follow the principles of a deity of justice and equality. It is the responsibility of people who share the same belief system to engage communities of people in ways that facilitate changing the condition and the environment of their living.

In the context of this document, the Black Church is defined as a designated group in America that finds its roots, traditions, ideals, and practices based in the experiences of those who were

brought to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; and who practiced Christianity as their religion. The members of the Black Church of this era practiced their faith in segregated sections of predominantly White churches, in churches that were organized by descendants of slaves<sup>1</sup>, or in invisible “praise houses” that were outside of the knowledge of their slave masters [Puckett (1926), Brooks (1922), McKinney (1971)].

Many Africans accepted Christianity as a means of survival. “Many Africans in America accepted Christianity because they were detribalized and thus removed from every meaningful relation, including understanding of the gods and religious traditions of their particular tribe or household. This separation opened the way for the acceptance of Christianity as means to interpret their existence in the world and a means to bond with other slaves” (Frazier, 1957: 133).

The Black Church is not merely defined by the “race” of its regular attendants but more so by its theological construct, the way in which the members view the person and the activity of God. The Black Church theological construct is derived both from Christian faith and African roots. That is, persons who were slaves in colonial America developed a view of God based upon the Christianity to which they were exposed, their knowledge of African religious traditions, and their present social condition. Cone (1984) argues that it is the combination of these two elements that allows persons to see the gospel message of Christianity through the lenses of liberation. “Black religious thought is not identical with the Christian theology of white Americans. Nor is it identical with traditional African beliefs...It is both – but reinterpreted for and adapted to the life-situation of black people’s struggle for justice” (Cone, 1984: 755). Thus the Black Church forms its thoughts of God around the idea of justice and freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the first were the Baptist church in Silver Bluff, South Carolina before the Revolutionary War and the African Methodist Episcopal denomination by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen [Puckett (1926), Brooks (1922), McKinney (1971)]



According to West, “This church, merely a rubric to designate black Christian communities of many denominations, came into being when slaves decided, often at the risk of life and limb, to ‘make Jesus their choice’” (West, 1982: 15). The African roots and traditions, the identity with slavery and segregation, drives the black church to seek liberation, justice, and equality for all people who are placed in a disadvantaged position.

However, one ought to be careful to not define the black church merely in terms of its social action/justice position, without giving attention to the nature and character of the church – what West called the existential character of the church. One has to consider that the Church has a spiritual mission at its core.

The Black Church is not only defined by its theological construct, but also by its culture and rituals. The culture addresses the idea of these groups gathering while using the same language, symbols, and cultural tools to address spiritual needs within the context of social reality. Barnes (2005) asserts that the Black Church culture is a conduit between commonly held beliefs, rituals and experiences among African Americans and subsequent processes and plans to address pressing social problems. The idea of the culture is to produce within the congregants a sense of belonging, loyalty, and reproduction in the system. Thus members of the Black Church are encouraged to become a part of the congregation, to remain faithfully committed to the deity and the church, and to recruit others to do the same.

The culture is developed through the use of rituals and cultural tools. “Rituals and tools are used to both justify and encourage congregants in the pursuit of social change. Reliance on spirituals, call-and-response, gospel music, prayer and scriptural references that evoke both prophetic as well as priestly activity emerged as African Americans appropriate elements of Christianity and African religions to address their social reality” (Barnes 2005: 970).

Chief among the rituals of the Black Church experience is the gathering for sacred meetings. These meetings are comprised of persons who come together for various expressions of worship through the use of cultural tools.

The cultural tools include prayers, songs, and rhetoric based on interpretations that help to solidify belief in the sovereignty of the deity while at the same time encouraging congregants to address social issues (Barnes, 2005).

While styles of congregational worship may vary within the Black Church, Barnes (2005) points out that scripture is essential in all settings. Prayers, songs, and rhetoric based on interpretation are all based upon scripture. It is through prayer that individuals and groups engage in sacred conversation with the deity in hopes of a change in various situations. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) is correct in her assertions that this faith expression covers a multitude of concerns for the one(s) engaging in prayers. “Prayers often focus not on individual salvation but on the needs of the family, the neighborhood, and even African Americans as a racial group” (Pattillo-McCoy 1998: 773).

Also, songs were based upon scripture and the social context of the day becomes a source of encouragement. This creative expression allows the congregants to share beliefs while eliciting courage. Sacred rhetoric (sermons) is used to assure and challenge congregants to apply “the message” to address not only their personal concerns, but the concerns of the community. This rhetoric is used to “break the silence” and provide hope on issues that concern the community. Bruegemann (2001) argues that the prophet uses the instrument or the weapon of the voice/word to contradict depressing or oppressing realities of a community.

The Black Church has this responsibility because it was born as an entity that provided spiritual, social, and political support during North American slavery and legalized segregation.

Its history is found in providing both spiritual and social answers for people who were confronted with difficult social, economic, and political positions in society. It has been well documented that the Black Church has always been the incubator for social consciousness and thus public awareness for African Americans. It can be said that the slave church was the propellant of messages of freedom that stood against the policies of chattel that restricted Africans in the United States. Because spirituality was used to confirm bondage, the North American slave was forced to develop an alternative theology to that of the slave owner. It was a theology that declared liberation, as opposed to bondage. The Black Church was birthed through provision for unity within the community and through expression of rebellion and protest against social and legal structures that dehumanized Africans and their descendants (McKinney, 1971).

The slave church<sup>2</sup> developed tools: rhetoric, rituals, and symbols to encourage the community. These tools included songs, prayer, memorized scripture, and sermons (Barnes, 2005). It was the slave preacher who, many times in opposition to the plantation appointed minister, declared that God's desire was for the slave to live as freed persons and that God would enforce his desire (Bullock-Woolridge, 1945).

In addition, the songs that were learned and performed had social and political consequences behind their lyrics. These songs seemed on the surface to speak about other worldly realities such as heaven, when in fact they spoke of the hope of freedom for every person who was in bondage. Religious slave songs shared images and expressions that appealed to ardent hope (White, 1983). For example, McKinney (1971) explains that when slave sang this song, "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's chil'un got shoes. When I get to heaven, I'm goin' to

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<sup>2</sup> The slave church held two dimensions. On the one hand there was the church that was sanctioned and monitored by the owner and/or his representative. On the other hand there were secret meetings, held beyond the gaze of the owner, where the people spoke, prayed, and sang about liberation (Pinn, 2003: 86).

put on my shoes, but everybody talkin' about heaven ain't goin' there," they were expressing their belief that God created them to be free and not slaves.

The sermons, lyrics, and prayers were put into practice when ministers and laypersons of the slave church participated with abolitionists in the Underground Railroad, a system of networks that was used to help escaped slaves to reach the North.

In many Black communities the church became the womb and the incubator for benevolent societies, businesses, schools, libraries, social gatherings, social services, vocational training, even the practice of quasi politics. For example, in the e18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the African Meeting House in Boston, MA was the location of Abiel Smith's school for African children and hosted Abolitionist speakers such as William Lloyd Garrison, Maria Stewart, and Fredrick Douglas. (Bower & Rushing, 1980). In addition, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century church leaders Father Malcolm C. Dade, Reverend Horace White, and Reverend Charles Hill were at the forefront of assisting African-Americans to secure rights with the United Auto Workers in Detroit (Dillard, 2007).

Moreover, the Black Church played a prominent role in the Civil Rights struggle of the mid-twentieth century. Many of the prominent leaders and participants of the movement were either ministers or laypersons in local congregations. The rhetoric, rituals, and symbols that were mentioned in earlier were used to encourage participants to protest for changes in the social and political structure of the land that rendered them second class citizens.

In fact, the Black Church may have enjoyed its greatest influence in challenging and changing public policy through social action during the Civil Rights era. However, there has been a sharp decline in the advocacy for social change through the Black Church since the end of that period (Smith, 2004). Since the end of the Civil Rights era the Black Church has had a

limited voice and role in the shaping of policy that affects the people of predominately poor and predominately black communities in areas such as public education, fair housing, policing, and the delivery of social services.

The Black Church is responsible for living up to the creeds of its deity because it is one of the only institutions where masses of people gather on a consistent basis. A 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life says that nearly 90 percent of African Americans believe in God and over 50 percent attend worship at least weekly. Most faith communities gather at least once per week, while many host gatherings multiple times during the week for various events. It is at these meetings that relevant information can be disseminated and synergy can be created to bring about desired change.

The social responsibility of the Black Church finds its roots in the scriptures of its sacred book, called the Bible; more particularly in the writings of the Hebrew prophets and the Gospels. The Black Church has historically taken a stand against unequal treatment of citizens while promoting social justice. According to Lechuga, Clerc, & Howell (2009), social justice is a framework that promotes an equal distribution of power and privilege for all citizens. One of the principal aims of the messages of the Hebrew prophets was that of justice or righteousness. Heschel (2001) suggests that justice and righteousness are inter-related concepts in that both describe how people treat one another in the interaction of life. It is a move beyond cultic activity to the right treatment of one another. It was the prophets who proclaimed a preference for security, freedom, and justice in this world's matters as much as other worldly matters. They staked a claim for freedom and justice among people in earthly matters above issuing mandates concerning spiritual matters. The prophetic mind-set was concerned with immediate, factual, sensuous experience (Roelofs, 1988). The concept of the Black Church

originated with the idea of moving beyond worship to seeking justice for people who were slaves; and later for people who were considered second-class citizenry.

The message of social justice and the call for social action is presented in the story of Jesus in the portion of scriptures called the Gospels. Hendricks contends that the message that Jesus proclaimed called for a change in the way individuals related to the world around them, but also for a change in the political, economic, and social structures that governed life in the first century Mediterranean. In like manner, many in the Black Church have proclaimed messages based on the stories of the Gospels that called for change in the structures that govern the lives of people who live in North America.

The Black Church has a responsibility because it is one of the few institutions in impoverished sectors that have the ability to gather and maintain the social capital that is necessary to bring about change. It is James' (2000) contention that social capital is derived from relationships one develops with those who share similar background and/or present circumstances. It is characterized by the amount of time, emotional investment, and reciprocity that evolves in a relationship between two or more people.

Social capital in the Black Church perspective is built upon congregants and communities sharing life experiences and by investing in one another's lives. In addition to support, the Black Church provides a space where social identity can be affirmed for those who otherwise feel marginalized by other social and political systems.

Portes (1998) says that is through social capital that the involved persons can gain access to economic resources such as subsidized loans, investments tips, and subsidized markets; can increase their cultural capital through contacts with individuals and institutions that help to refine world perspectives.

The Black Church has a responsibility because it is one of the few institutions of impoverished communities that offer a space for collective economics. While credible figures are difficult to obtain (because of lack of reporting), it is conceivable that millions of dollars are contributed to black churches. With the right mission and focus these funds could be used and combined with other sources of funding to bring about significant social change.

Both Brueggemann (2001) and West (1982) argue that it is the church's responsibility to point out the faults of systems that create, perpetuate, or ignore the living conditions and circumstances that encourage and facilitate unhealthy social and civic existence. They maintain that the biblical prophetic tradition to call for community transformation by challenging corrupt social systems through word and deed is still relevant and necessary in contemporary Christian groups. The prophetic tradition means to publicly point out factors that produce debilitating and unstable living while at the same time energizing and mobilizing people to bring about the necessary change. Brueggemann asserts that it is the duty of the church to work against what he calls the *dominant culture* that seeks to maintain positions of power and privilege at all cost. "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" (Brueggemann, 2001: 3). West maintains that the church should promote ultimate salvation (faith/going to heaven), while at the same time liberating and empowering individuals socially, economically, and politically.

The work of the church in community transformation requires those individuals and institutions that have the imagination to think and act differently than the status quo. In this work, Brueggemann calls for the faith community to act in what he calls *prophetic imagination* to bring about the necessary change in the lives of people who live in impoverished conditions.

He suggests that prophetic imagination moves beyond liberal confrontational models of the conservative status quo. "...prophetic imagination requires more than old liberal confrontation if the point is not posturing but effecting change in social perspective and social policy" (Brueggemann, 2001: xii).

Brueggemann's contention that this kind of imaginative activity begins with speech that is used to critique unhealthy social realities, while at the same time prompting listeners to move in creating a different reality that promotes and sustains community. Brueggemann concedes that this model is not without challenges that are inherent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; namely a society that is based in consumerism and that is saturated in technology that discourages community. It is this sort of society that promotes individualism and works against community.

The idea is to offer an alternative perception of reality and in allowing people to see their own history in light of God's freedom and His will for justice. Such realities occur when the ideas and perceptions of oppressive systems are dismantled and at the same time people are energized to act and create new systems that counter such regime.

West's notion of prophetic Christianity suggests the need and the striving for both spiritual freedom and existential freedom. It is the idea of showing one the way to get to heaven, while at the same time helping them to live in a healthy manner psychologically, physically, emotionally, materially, and morally. It is to address the crisis that is described by Cone, "Our crisis is spiritual, material, and moral." In order to do so the church must become a living critique and alternative of oppressive systems. This has been the Black Church's role from its inception. It started as a critique of the American slavery system through slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990); and in some cases has progressed to become a critique of the misuse of capitalism (King, 1968).



However, West contends that the church must resist the temptation to merely criticize current conditions and systems; it must encourage overcoming these situations. The church must focus less on criticism and more on empowering. The power to transform is built on collective efforts and wealth and not on individualism. The church must stand against an individualistic, ultra-conservative, liberalist views and support the idea of community. According to West, who denounced Marxism based on Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, the Councilist model of Marxism, which combines individualism, democracy, along with a concern for the community, may be what is necessary. What is necessary is not a socialist movement that puts power into the hands of one or a few, but a system that empowers individuals so that the individual might strengthen the community.

The efforts of Black Church-led social action have not been monolithic in nature. There have been those from within the Black community who have criticize the Black Church for not being aggressive enough in helping Black people to defend themselves against violence and to be self-sustaining . Although not a Christian, Malcolm X<sup>3</sup> was often critical of non-violent approach employed by Black Church leaders to gain civil rights during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Marable, 2011). Additionally, the Black Power Movement, a term that was first used by Stokely Carmichael<sup>4</sup> in 1966, advocated “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary...including selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion” (Cone, 1997: 6).

While it is the contention of some that the church’s only role is to help people to develop morally and ethically so that those people can “go to heaven,” the church’s mission is to stand

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm X (1925-1965) was a leader of Black Muslims in America during the mid-20th century (Marable 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) was a leader in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee arm of the Civil Rights Movement. He coined the phrase, “Black Power” during a rally in Greenwood, MS on June 16, 1966 (Branch, 2006).

against those systems that are designed to limit the possibilities of a standard of living that is suitable to their needs. In other words, the church must be the catalyst for both spiritual and material well-being. It is to flesh out the words of King (1964) “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up.”

## **Challenges**

However, the dynamics of the Black Church does present its challenges. Just as in the overall African-American community there are class issues that tend to divide more than unite. In the administration of the church males seem to dominate even though the number of men who regular attend church is significantly lower than that of their female counterparts. A study from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life states that African Americans are significantly more religious than other groups in this country; women are more likely to be committed to their faith. The study suggested that 84 percent of the surveyed and only 59 percent of the men survey religious services once per week. Yet, a 2009 study by the Barna Group shows that only 10% of churches have female senior pastors or chief executive officers (mostly mainline protestant churches); and these females are more likely to be seminary trained (77 percent versus 62 percent) but are paid less (\$45,000 per year versus \$48,000 per year).

The class issue goes beyond administration to the relationships among members and the community as a whole. The same issues that cause division in the African-American community as a whole have a way of affecting the camaraderie in the church. Like many people in this country, African Americans desire the upward mobility that is the product of education and

economic attainment. The unfortunate reality is that the attainment of significant education and wealth is less likely for many African American families who attend church with the few who have garnered such achievements. A 2007 study by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy indicates that African Americans are less likely to achieve wealth and more likely remain in debt than other ethnicities.

There are some in African American communities who do achieve and accumulate. The achievements and accumulation of goods by some lends to the potential for the divide between those who have and those who have not achieved this notion of success. The potential problem arises from those who have the means to contribute more to the church and are considered more acceptable to mainstream society who would rather forget the needs of those who have legitimate social needs. However, as Cole and Omari point out, there still remains a strand of those upwardly mobile who preach and practice continued involvement with “lower class” Black people.

In many contemporary churches the focus is on praise and worship. And while praise and worship has its place, it cannot be the complete focus of the Church when so many in the vicinity of the Church are hardly surviving. Too often, praise services have taken the place of social action in the Black Church. Hendricks (2004) is correct in his declaration that too often people believe that praise is completely captured in what we say and has very little validity in what we do.

The church must also find ways to overcome internal generational issues that prohibit one generation from embracing and appreciating other generations. Layne (1977) correctly points out that there are at least two areas where organizations, including the church, face the challenge of finding common purpose and approaches to accomplishing said purpose. On the one hand there

can be division based upon chronological age. That is, persons who were born at one particular period in history or persons who experience some particular period in history together have problems associating with persons who were born at another particular point in history or who have experienced (or not) different events. These differences are ordinarily framed in a lack of appreciation for the contributions and potential contributions that those outside of one's age or experience group.

Mimitzraiem (2010) suggests that the beginning of any intergenerational progression and production begins with understanding and, more importantly, appreciation of the voices and experiences of other generations. Just as it takes all generations in the formation of culture – the music, literature, art, cuisine, and language; it takes all generations to give a true picture of a particular cultures theology – the interpretation and use of scriptures, rhetoric, rituals, and symbols. A true representation is best presented through the creative, traditional interpretation and presentation of the scriptures, rhetoric, rituals, and symbols, along with the imaginative progressive interpretation and presentation of the scriptures, rhetoric, rituals, and symbols.

On the other hand, generational issues occur within subsets of a particular group or culture because of longevity. In such cases persons and their potential contributions are excluded or included depending upon the length of time they have been connected to the particular group. It is assumed that one's ability to contribute is based upon historic experience rather than knowledge and skills.

Generational consciousness (Layne, 1977) could be a factor in the divide between the various generations. It is the result of different perceptions of reality. Contrary to Smith's assertion, perception and belief are closely aligned (Smith, 2001). The differences in generation could very well result from differing beliefs as it relates to goals, direction, mode of operation,

and the pace of change. What one perceives of a situation will directly affect their view of approaches to particular situations and who should participate. In many cases what is at work is the ever advancing technology of society. The “next” generation perceives through the lenses of the advances that have been made since and during their lifetime; while the “previous” generation many times relies on what has worked all along.

Yet another challenge to consider and overcome is the exclusion of those who are rooted in the cultural phenomenon call Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop is a subset of urban culture that generated from the Bronx, New York in the mid-to-late 1970s. It was developed and expanded primarily by urban young people who found it a means of expressing what it meant to live in their particular neighborhoods (Watkins, 2007). The particular elements of Hip-Hop include rapping (talking rhythmically over music), deejaying (providing music through electronic means), dancing, and graffiti. This culture affected the way people, especially young people in urban settings, communicated, dressed, and view the world around them.

Watkins (2007) suggests that the Hip-Hop generation, as it is called, is comprised of those persons who were born between 1965 and 1986; and now their children. However, this so-called generation can more accurately be defined by having multiple generations within the generation. On the one hand, there are those who were born in the earlier suggested age range who were adolescents when the culture began to become a nationwide phenomenon. People in this generation are now considered middle-aged and now deal with all of the responsibilities that are a part of their age range. For the most part they see life through different lenses than perhaps they did when Hip-Hop was in its infancy. On the other hand, there remains those persons who were born after 1986 who have never known a world without Hip Hop culture. Naturally, this particular sub-generation has a different perspective and values than the previous sub-generation.

It could well be that the culture has become more commercialized and there is much more capitalistic influences in the marketing and sale of materials.

There are differences in values that materialize in these overlapping sub-cultures within the overall culture. Watkins suggest that the disconnect from the older sub-generation generate from their questions about how social concerns relate to their pursuit of the so-call American Dream. At the same time, the disconnect from the younger sub-generation is the result of their perception of being misunderstood by previous generations, their cynical world view, and their proclaimed desire for realism, honesty, authenticity, and credibility.

Another area that works contrary to the concept of meaningful social action is the idea of prosperity gospel. This is the notion that faith automatically entitles the believer to a life of health and wealth. This notion threatens the core values and the historical legacy of the Black Church (Franklin 2007). The problem is that this so-called gospel recapitulates an environment of greed that causes congregants to be consumed with only their personal issues. It is up to those who would engage in prophetic ministry to work counter to this notion of greed. Franklin proposes what he calls *prophetic stewardship*, the idea that the Christian gospel is only concerned with personal and temporal goods – spiritual, social, psychological, physical, and material.

This theology of health and wealth moves the people's focus away from the issues that affect the larger society in a negative way to a concentration on obtaining an individually-centered prosperous life. This theological excursion dilutes and even dissipates in the minds of individuals the need for strategic efforts to change conditions that place persons in the social/political/economic position that would make them believe that the teachings of prosperity gospel present their only reason for hope. To the detriment of people, the prosperity gospel

promotes the lack of interest in social justice, a naive view of capitalism, and a stress on individual conversion rather than a focus on systemic analysis for social change (Mamiya, 2006).

There are many Black Churches that are involved in meeting the immediate needs of persons in poor communities with programs such as, but not limited to food pantries, clothes give-a-ways. While programs of this nature are beneficial for temporary solutions to real problems, they do not yield outcomes that will transform situations. Therefore, the Black Church must find its role and become a participant in the formulation and implementation of local, state, and national social policy as well as use its available resources to encourage and empower people to move beyond a welfare state to productive self-sufficiency.

This is the “power” that Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968) speaks of in his work *Where Do We Go From Here?* Power is the ability to achieve purpose – social, political, and economic changes.

The social, political, and economic systems of the day have a tendency to leave impoverished people powerless to bring about any meaningful and sustainable change for the entire community. As King suggested, these communities are not deprived except in the area of power. Those who find themselves living in such conditions cannot afford to continue to wait for other entities, such as the government to hand deliver this power. But rather they must work by constructive means to amass economic and political power.

Economic power can be derived in two ways. On the one hand, people in impoverished areas should work with and inside labor movements where people are not bound by race; such movements allow working class people with similar ideals to pool their resources together to develop better living and working conditions. On the other hand, economic power can be derived by developing better consumer habits. For example, the Bureau of Labor 2005 Consumer

Expenditure Survey indicated that households earning on average \$25,596 per year actually spent \$28,921 that year (page 7). Lastly, people who live in poverty should conduct business with those institutions that are interested in investing in and supporting their communities.

Gaining political power requires the people of these communities to do more than just register and vote. It will call for like-minded individuals to consolidate in order to create, elect, and hold accountable those leaders who will embody the principles and the goodwill of the communities.

In order to generate such transformative power the Black Church must be willing to create spaces that will allow for intellectualism – thoughtful treatment of issues. Social policies can be developed and implemented, and community self-realization is possible when spiritual awakening, community engagement, and scholarship are joined to bring about the desired results. In some Black Church settings scholarship is rejected for the sake of the “activity of the Spirit.” However, the scholastic component that includes theologians to teach systematic approaches to understanding God, lawyers to develop and present policies, and sociologists to bring an understanding to the issues, creates thoughtful actions and reactions.

Certainly, the Black Church is not the only religious institution worthy of consideration in a study of the role of religion in the social action and public policy arenas. The Black Church is specified because of its history and tradition of social involvement that has seemingly shifted from a focus on community empowerment to self-centered realities. Helco’s (2001) assertion that religious affiliation moves people to act publicly in areas such as voting, political activism, and community organizing, could be challenged by what appears to be an overall religious culture of indifference and apathy to social and political inequalities. Secondly, the Black Church is specified because of its historical and current connection with those persons in the United



States who may be in the most need of participation and the target of social action and policies that improve the quality of life for all citizens. Lastly, the Black Church is specified because of its extraordinary potential in social capacity in the areas of social action and public policy.

However, Helco is correct in the suggestion that religion and public policy are inextricably tied together in that they are both concerned with the way people live. To be sure, both are different. Religion is concerned with the ultimate end and public policy is concerned with the here and now (Helco, 2001). True religion is not only concerned with the ultimate end, but shares the public policy view of dealing with present issues. Both religion and public policy are concerned with setting boundaries (or removing them) and pointing out responsibilities (or removing them) in the manner in which people and social/political systems interact.

## Chapter 2. Review of Literature

### **Poverty**

Beliefs concerning the reality and consequences, the causes and effects of poverty generally fall in two categories: *individualistic* and *structuralistic* (Merolla, Hunt, Serpe, 2011). The individual point of view asserts that the cause and responsibility of poverty and its effects are the result of the poor having different values, morals, and motives that lead to their social/economic/political position. The structuralist view suggests that poverty is the result of systemic composites that are the root causes for inequality. Those with more resources and means tend to support the individualist view, while those who are the weakest politically tend to support the structuralist view (Merolla, Hunt, Serpe, 2011). Although the two opinions seem mutually at odds, it is likely that the reality of poverty and its consequences are a combination of the two strands of thought (Merolla, Hunt, Serpe, 2011). Factors such as personal responsibility, lack of applicable skills and training, as well as unemployment and lack of access to resources and decision making bodies all contribute the state and status of disadvantaged persons and groups. The consequences of poverty include, but are not limited to, inferior educational institutions, the suffering of more disease and earlier death, more crime and violence, the accruing of less wealth, and fewer job opportunities (Dwyer, 2010).

Poverty could very well be the result of an every widening wealth gap that supports the interest of the more affluent in a society while depriving the needs of those who are disadvantaged (Pacione, 1990). In a report by Emmanuel Saez of the University of California-Berkley, during the years 1993-2008, the top 1% of persons garnered fifty-two (52) percent of the annual income growth<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Saez, Emmanuel (2008). Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States, *Pathways Magazine*, Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, 6-7

The imperative of the work of the Black Church is found in the ever increasing disparities that show divisions in both race and class. Although Murray (2012) argues that the disparities are nearly equally shared in this country, the truth is that the United States Census Bureau reported that in 2009 the number of people living in poverty had increase to 43.6 million, the highest in fifty-one years. The percentage by race breakdown in this report includes: African Americans – 25.8, Hispanics – 25.3, Asians - 12.5, non-Hispanic Whites 9.4<sup>6</sup>. The Black Church should seek to provide spiritual and material well-being to the people of all nationalities living within the confines of the just presented numbers.

The statistics should inform the Black Church in its social action and social policy efforts. Too often a weaker version of social action is put forth that does not seek to change the long-term condition of persons and communities. The work should focus not merely on helping those persons in a manner such that they remain in their particular state, but to equip those persons with the necessary tools to work to improve their station in life. Martin, Bowles, Adkins, Leach (2011: 6) gives an adequate explanation of the different approaches.

Four social outreach efforts seem particularly relevant for this study: social conservatism, social service, social conversion, and social action. **Social conservatism** strives to engage individuals in benevolent institutions that maintain existing societal structures, while remaining silent regarding perpetual, social inequalities. **Social service** concentrates on assisting underserved individuals or populations across the developmental life span, sponsoring programs in areas such as homelessness, hunger, mentoring, parenting, etc. that support individuals or populations. Next, **social conversion** focuses on evangelistic missions; thus, local, state, national, and international missions characterize these churches' stance regarding societal challenges. Each of these three **social outreach** efforts underscores first-order strategies. In contrast, social action refers to churches that seek to transform societal inequalities through their participation in activities such as civil disobedience, community organizing, political involvement, public policy engagement, and organized protest. These outreach efforts strive to transform oppressive systems, which is characteristic of second-order change.

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<sup>6</sup> Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009. United States Census Bureau.

While there has been progression in the material elements of society such as advances in technology, science, and corporate business, we must be careful that the human element has not progressed as a result. Mohan (1992) suggests that what is necessary is a society in which science, technology, public policy, and corporate progression recognize the human lives that are affected by decisions that are made. Mohan makes a call for freedom without oppression, progress without dehumanization, diversity without totalism, and spirituality without dogma. The faith community is qualified to ensure such an element. It is the faith community that should remain the conscience of society to ensure that persons are not exploited and rendered invisible in the name of progress and profit. This is especially true for those churches that are situated in impoverished geographic areas and serve people who live in poverty.

### **Public Theology**

What is proposed is an expansion of Martin Marty's (1981) term *public theology*. It is a term he used to describe the need for the church to critique social practices and cultural understandings juxtaposed with religious understandings of love and justice. Marty's term is a criticism of a theological perspective that is a privatized form of reflection that seeks only personal solace and personal gain (Caddy, 1987). By virtue of theology's preoccupation with understanding the reality of God, theologians must not rest content with private confessions of faith which neither inform nor persuade others (Tracy, 1981). Unlike Caddy's findings and going further than Marty's interpretation, theology must be made public through expressions of understanding and critique of society through both theory and praxis. Through public theology, the meaning of God is to be learned through both intellect and experience. It is both conjectural,

in that it calls one to critical and analytical considerations, and utilitarian, in that it becomes useful in influencing and impacting society for the greater good.

Rauschenbusch (1907) supports such an argument when he says that religion, specifically Christianity, was launched with the purpose and hope of a revolutionary movement that would bring about a new era that is founded on a moral basis.

The goal of spirituality should not only be self-centered, but should also stimulate others to work towards overcoming the ills that have negative effect on efforts to create an equitable and just global society (Lapierre, 1994). This may be more prevalent among poorer people and people of color (Stewart, 1999). Spirituality is a unifying force that brings stability and empowerment to people who are trying to cope culturally and spiritually in the world. There is vertical unity with a higher power (God) and horizontal connection with other humans who face the same dehumanizing and oppressive challenges in life (Stewart, 1999).

### **Liberation Theology**

Public theology that leads to social action, civic engagement, and policy involvement in the Black Church perspective ordinarily finds its theological foundation in liberation theology. The roots of this sector of Christianity are found in Latin American theologians' response to harsh working conditions, impoverished conditions in their native countries, and to the Catholic Church (Levine, 1988). The term "liberation" is not used in any contemporary political sense that speaks liberal social values; but instead speaks of freedom from unnecessary obstacles and challenges that prevent humans from living up to their full potential. The term theology speaks of one's view of God, more specifically the study of God. In this case, the term theology is based in religious perspectives (an understanding of the nature of God and the interpretation of the

scriptures) from the perspective of the poor. While society as a whole may view the poor classes as little more than a necessary evil to complete domestic tasks, liberation theology works under the premise that all of humanity has the God-given right to live freely as human beings without the encumbrances of injustice and inequality. Liberation theology allows the disadvantaged to interpret and articulate spirituality (Christianity) through practical lenses that fit their spiritual and material condition (Hopkins, 1999, Herndl and Bauer, 2003).

There are some ideologies that maintain that spiritual and material matters should remain separate. That method of thinking is erroneous in that it limits the spirituality to only other-worldly matters, and thus leaves humans to fend for themselves in all other matters. It is erroneous in that it suggests a religion that is purely based on future concerns without any stress on present realities. Liberation theology requires that people of faith be committed to the salvation of people in a spiritual, as well as in a material and historic way. This process calls for the church to move beyond its institutional and ideological boundaries in order to create a solidarity with and among the poor that creates a new consciousness, sense of self-worth, and a capacity for action that will strive for radical politically and economically reforms (Levine, 1988, Herndl and Bauer, 2003).

Liberation theology is a religiously-themed response to what is perceived as unjust and unequal treatment of a particular group of people. It integrates religious practice, political revolution, and community life into a broad cultural formation that varies from country to country and from community to community, always emerging from specific local conditions (Herndl and Bauer, 2003). The idea is to create a collective movement based upon spiritual values among the poor and disenfranchised that will create a more equal and humane society by effecting changes through the development and implementation of policy. The practice of

liberation theology involves an interconnection of the spiritual and material well-being of the individual, the church, and the larger community. It is the practice of helping individuals and groups to realize the full potential of their humanity through spiritually and socially based rhetoric that serves as a “call to action” to cause or produce the desired change. Historically, the transformation of unfit and unfair structures have been the result of the persuasion of both civil disobedience and armed resistance.

### **Black Liberation Theology**

Black liberation theology takes the same concepts and applies them to the historical plight of African Americans in the United States.<sup>7</sup> One of the main proponents of liberation theology, James Cone contends that the same religious perspective that was applied to those who lived in poverty in Latin American should be applied in order to improve the living conditions of African Americans. The Black Church must remain as the main progenitor of liberation theology in the United States (Cone, 1970).

Historically, the practice of liberation theology has stimulated the Black Church to encourage, train, and commission individuals to oppose legalized, structural efforts to either ignore or dehumanize the existence and the rights of African Americans. In the mid-twentieth century, liberation theology was the impetus that activated sit-ins, marches, and protest that led to the development and implementation of voting rights, as well as basic civil rights. It is through the church that people learn to live out the scriptures that present a divinely-appointed lifestyle of freedom from legalized or illegally accepted customs and practices that bring about obstructions

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<sup>7</sup> Liberation Theology is founded in Latin American theologians’ response to the impoverished living conditions and harsh working conditions of indigenous people of Latin American. Black Liberation Theology employs the same applications to the civil and social issues that affect African Americans in the United States.

to every person reaching their full potential. It is the church's role to provide a visible fellowship that not only proclaims liberation, but participates in the struggle for liberation (Cone, 1970).

While Cone (1986) speaks of Liberation Theology in terms of Black people in America (Black Liberation Theology), it is true that Liberation Theology, for the sake of oppressed people from all walks of life, must take seriously the cultural expressions of the community it represents so that it will be able to speak relevantly to the community. The ways in which people became a community and even the historical transitions of that community; as well as the mechanisms used to cope with and express the joys and pains of the people of the community must be taken into account in the effort to apply a plan of spiritual and social empowerment and liberation pursue and grasp fulfillment and satisfaction in life.

Cone (1986) correctly asserts that Black Liberation Theology is the outgrowth of the African American experience in America and seeks understanding from Christian Holy Scriptures to understand the situations of people. In the same manner, Liberation Theology that is relevant and instrumental as a theological and philosophical catalyst to encourage all people who are politically, socially, and economically inhibited to espouse and attain justice and equality must be inclusive of all ethnicities. Liberation Theology is applicable in all situations where discrimination and injustice serve as either the official or unofficial principle for disenfranchising and disinherit persons for any reason.

## **Social Justice**

Social justice, the way access to public goods and services are distributed among the population, are a reflection of the social values of the various groups that make up a society. In the American model, issues arise between one set of values that determine that individuals



should have sole responsibility for themselves and their well-being; and the set of values that determines that the community has a role to play in the well-being of its citizens (Iheduru, 2006). The extent and the direction of access to public goods and services are usually determined and distributed by those whose social values system is in the dominant political position at any given time. The Black Church should work from the perception that the faith community has a role to play in helping all citizens to have full access and take full advantage of the systems, the resources, and the capital that is available to ensure healthy and prosperous living.

Although efforts to end slavery, to bring and end to legal segregation, and to offer persons the right to vote have been largely successful, there still remains the struggle to address and end social injustices, poverty and the healthy wellbeing of all citizens (Harris, 2010). To be sure, the pursuit of social justice is not limited, but it covers the vast variety of concerns that compass the human social existence. Those areas that call for immediate attention even in this day and age include the quality of health and healthcare, education, public policy changes, and the over population of poor people and people of color in prison industrial complexes. Improving the quality of life through the pursuit of social justice includes addressing social concerns such as adequate housing, living wages, environmental safety, and social capital that support the dignity and respectability of people who are living in poverty. (Harris, 2010). It should be noted that these are not racial issues, but issues that exist across racial lines.

Social justice suggests a system of treatment that purports fairness, respect, and dignity for all persons of a given society (Iheduru, 2006 and Hendricks, 2011). However, this ideal goes far beyond the ritual of public politeness; but leads to the insurance of access to the same economic, political, legal, and social advantages for every member of a given society.

Sadurski (1984) suggests that this kind of distribution should be based upon merit. In other words, the access to the same economic, political, legal, and social advantages based upon the membership in a given society. This line of thinking suggests that every person of every social group of any given society is given the same rights, support, opportunity, and protection of every person in a given society. In this manner, rules and policies are developed and enacted with both legal and human elements in mind.

The tension in the attempts to practice social justice is found in the fact that for the portion of those who are outside of the dominant culture lies in the fact more times than not legitimacy is determined by the hegemonic portion of the society. The dominant part of the culture works to determine what is important, normal, and acceptable. The dominant portion of the society works to convince that truth and reality are determined by its values. The faith community on the other hand, works to present and nurture a sense of reality that may oppose the permanence and the privilege of the dominant culture (Bruegemann, 3). This is not accomplished without a struggle. The ability of those who lack power will find it difficult to influence the results of issues of the distribution of access to public goods and services.

### **Social Action**

The goal of social action is to move persons beyond mental and academic conceptions of what is true about particular situations to changing mere theory into practice. It is a framework that seeks to build an infrastructure of material goods, services, policies, and programs that will transform the living conditions for persons who live in a disenfranchised state of being (Mohan, 1992). Social action seeks to challenge existing systems that are not beneficial for all by either changing the existing system or creating an alternative that will best fit the need of the day. It

moves persons beyond complaining to actually trying to replace dysfunctional arrangements with more beneficial plans, methods, and implementations.

Churches that are involved in social action are progressive in nature tend to become involved in the civil, political, and social affairs of the community. In doing so, they do face the challenge of being considered “worldly” or of having strayed away from the “true” spiritual mission of the church (Lee, 2003). While Lee’s work focuses on the activities of one leader and one church in the Midwest, the risks remain the same for any church that engages in the practice of bringing about social transformation. However, Hendricks argues that Christianity is founded on a leader that faced tremendous criticism and even death because he was very much socially and politically engaged (Hendricks, 2006).

Action is not taken for the sake of doing so. Social action requires and involves a critique of present conditions and a conclusion that situations or systems are not just or equal (Brueggemann, 2001). It is the critique and evaluation that leads to the resolve to effect change.

To be sure, social action is the product of individuals who have developed some sense of social consciousness. Actions that flow from the community are generally the outgrowth of a person’s knowledge of their surroundings (Fantasia, 1995, Corning and Myers, 2002). These persons ordinarily find dissatisfaction in the way that the present conditions impact their living. Persons who become fanatical about a movement are usually people who feel that they are oppressed by the current operating systems. These individuals become involved in movements because they think that they have been failed and marginalized by the current operations. In addition, these persons feel helpless in their individual state and seek to find (or lose) themselves in something that they think has the power and force to change their current situation. The individual is willing to make sacrifices in order to gain victory over the circumstances that they

feel are causing the dissatisfaction in their life. They will give their money, their resources, their time, their talent, and in some cases their life in order to see the revolution succeed. The church is filled with such persons who give a standard percentage of their income at the very least, who spend sometimes up to ten hours per week at the church, and who will apply their talents and experiences in order to see their particular church parish prosper, or overcome the enemies of sin, destitution, and human pain (Hoffer, 1951).

### **Social Policy**

Social policy includes the decision-making process, defining the problems, implementing the decisions, and the product of the decisions (Dolgoff and Feldstein, 2000). Quite often policies that affect the public interest are designed with seemingly little interest in the effects on constituent lives. The development of public policy should take into consideration the impact of the implementation of these laws and rules on individuals and communities (Okongwu and Mencher, 2000). It is this point that magnifies the importance of the role that the Black Church should necessarily play in the public policy arena. The Black Church can take an anthropological role in bringing to the attention of policymakers through an eyewitness account, the conditions under which people are living. Not only so, but there are instances where the church still takes the responsibility of helping individuals understand the importance of political participation or the nuances of proposed legislation.

When it is used to bring about necessary transformation for the good of the people, social policy is an instrument for social justice (Mohan, 1992). The role of the Black Church in such instances is to become involved in such a way that policies are designed and enacted that will cause society or community structures to become more just and equitable in access and

distribution. In essence, social policies should work for the good of both individuals and families, and the systems that they are designed to support or enhance.

To be sure the church must be informed and prepared before engaging any efforts to influence public policy. Otherwise, the church becomes a part of the problem, rather than offering real solutions to the problem. When it is not prepared and offering real solutions to problems the church does more to exacerbate and aggravate the situation than to bring about desired conclusion (Beckford, 1990).

### Chapter 3. Methodology

The Methodology section will discuss how information was gathered and applied to the for the study. This section will show how the information that gathered was used to answer the question of relevance and effectiveness for the church and its social services and social action efforts.

The prevalence off persistent issues concerning adequate access and resources to help those who are impoverished to improve their plight in life provides the impetus for this particular study. The purpose of this project is to show that the Black Church does have a role to play in the social action and public policy development and maintenance that is necessary to improve the chances of better living conditions and lifestyles for those persons who find themselves living in impoverished and disenfranchised situations. While there have been studies on the Black Church's historical role in these arenas, this study seeks to answer the question of the Black Church's relevance in such situations. Secondly, the project seeks to show whether or not the Black Church can overcome the empirical challenges such as internal politics and phobias, as well as the challenges of lack of resources, access to power, and lack of human capital necessary to garner influence and impact.

The Black Church has historically operated with said challenges and still managed to help individuals improve both their spiritual and material lot in life. It has had at least a minimal impact and influence on local, state, and in some cases federal policies. In the age of mega-churches (over 2,000 congregants), the likelihood of greater impact and influence is possible with determination and effort.

## **Use of Case Study Approach**

The case study model was selected because it allows the author to show how two churches serve as models of how the contemporary church should and can address the social issues that make living difficult for people of certain segments of society (Yin, 2003). More specifically, the study is empirical in nature in that it shows the work of the churches in the context of their communities. This model allows the observance of the past and present activities of the institutions.

## **Selection of Churches**

Two model churches have been chosen as examples of what can be accomplished. The models were chosen because both exemplify and exhibit the concept of how faith communities should handle its responsibility to society. These churches were selected because they have demonstrated both the relevance and the potency of the Church in the social affairs of this world's citizens. . Each church is measured by the following markers (1) leadership commitment to social justice, (2) Christian Education that focuses on Liberation Theology and Social Justice, (3) local community engagement in addressing social needs, (4) public policy engagement, and (5) global engagement.

Both churches have shown a commitment to Brueggemann's *prophetic ministry* in the way that they should seek to invest in the well-being of human lives. Their work extends well beyond the spiritual aspects in the work of faith communities to the actions that are necessary to transform both living conditions and justice issues. Both of these churches are involved in strengthening their respective communities in terms of political influence, economic development, and ethics and morality

The moniker *Alpha* will be used to describe one and *Omega* the other. Both churches are considered traditional Black Church in that they are Christian in nature; find their social philosophical genesis and style of worship in the slave churches of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Table 1. Demographics of Model Churches

Church	Apprx. No. Members	No. Auxiliaries	Community Focused Auxiliaries	Affiliate Auxiliaries	Community Collaborations
<i>Alpha</i>	8,000	72	20	5	11
<i>Omega</i>	12,000	39	10	4	9

The chart above describes how the model churches allocate their resources to social action and the influencing of public policy. The number of auxiliaries represents the number of groups that have been developed to address both the congregational and community needs of the church. Of that number, certain auxiliaries are dedicated to community work. They are labeled *community focused auxiliaries*. The affiliate auxiliaries represent groups that were developed to operate outside of the auspices of the church structure to address social needs. In addition, the community collaborations represent ongoing relations with other religious organizations, government entities, and civic organizations.

The chart shows that both churches have dedicated substantial effort and resources to reach beyond the confines of church structures and to form relationships that would allow them to be most effective. The affiliate auxiliaries were developed to address needs such as elderly housing, early childhood education, healthy food choices for urban residents, and post-high school education and career assistance. The collaborations are relationships with other religious organizations and churches, civic groups such as the National Urban League, and government



entities such as Land Grant Colleges and Universities. It should be noted that the numbers in the chart reflect the different structures of the auxiliaries in the two churches and not the effort or resources dedicated to social action.

The material used to measure the commitment and effectiveness of the churches is published materials that have been endorsed by the church, personal contact and knowledge, and individual church websites. The data was collected by requesting and receiving published information from the two churches, through personal contact and familiarity with the leaders and former leader of the churches, and through searching electronic accounts of the churches' activities. The endorsed published materials include historical accounts about the development of the churches. The method was selected because of familiarity with the leadership and the work of the churches. In addition, the method was selected because it provided an efficient avenue to collect the necessary information to determine if in fact the church can and should have a significant and relevant role in addressing social issues of today.

The goal of this analysis is to show models in the Black Church arena that are successful at social praxis as well as the spiritual well-being of individuals and communities. The study of these churches will show that it is possible for the local Black Church to be effective in impacting and influencing its community beyond rhetoric, but also through social action and through engaging civic and legal issues.

These churches were selected because of the quantity and quality of resources they dedicate to addressing social issues that make life difficult for the people of certain communities. The work of these churches seeks to address educational needs through counseling, after-school programming, charter school operation, and summer enrichment programming. They address elderly housing needs through the development of assisted living housing for the elderly. The

churches are involved with protest against corporate entities that the church membership thinks takes advantage of people and communities, as well as seeking to help those individuals who find themselves entangled in the court systems across the country.

### **Limitations**

The limitation with reporting on this subject matter is that it is always a work in progress, which makes it difficult to determine the full impact of the actions of the church. It can prove to be an arduous task to track people's progression after their participation in services or after their lives have been affected by a challenge to unjust policy initiatives. In addition, the number of auxiliaries ascends and descends in order to meet current needs.

### **Action research**

The purpose of this study is to provide information that will allow the Black Church to assess and strategically address the social ills that plague the majority of communities where Black churches are located. This research that addresses practical concerns (Small, 1995) and to provide the impetus for community action. The idea is to contribute to the body of research, while at the same time provide practitioners with information that can be utilized (Small, 1995). Thus, there is an attempt to contribute to intellectual capacity while at the same time empowering practitioners with facts and models.

## Chapter 4. Model Churches

### **Alpha**

This church is located in a metropolitan city in the southwest portion of the United States. Its congregants are predominantly African-American. The 36-year old institution has grown from approximately 50 members to approximate 12,000 members. The church owns a 60-acre campus that provides for the congregants' spiritual and social needs. A part of the mission statement says that the church is committed to a ministry of evangelization, edification, and emancipation, in the Church and the community. That is, intentional plans and efforts are made to proselytize persons into the Christian faith; build up communities, families, and individuals; and to help persons to live free of social, economic, and psychological impediments. *Alpha* claims membership in one of the national Baptist organizations that seeks to connect Baptist African-American churches from across the country. The church developed a community-centered organization focused on social justice through the perspective, the teaching, the affiliations, and the work of its leader.

The leader of *Alpha*, termed senior pastor, is a third generation preacher/pastor. He grew up attending and participating in church activities on the west coast of the United States in a church that was led by his grandfather and his father. His grandfather and father had a history of leading the church in social praxis. In the late 1950s and early 1960s his grandfather and the church he led were noted for community activism and were instrumental in building apartment complexes dedicated to provide housing for low income families. When his father assumed the leadership role in the church they worked with the Leon Sullivan's Opportunities Industrial Center to provide job opportunities for the disadvantaged, established a re-entry into society station for persons exiting prison, and created summer job programs for the young people of the community. However, the senior pastor admits that it was under his father's successor that *Alpha*

had the most impact on his early mental construction of the church and social justice commitment. It was under the successor that the senior pastor learned social action and the need to impact public policy through boycotts, and the construction and establishment of a community center that was used to provide jobs to persons in the community.

The senior pastor was further influence during college and seminary matriculation. He attended a historically black college that was founded by Baptist ministers and a seminary that was operated by the Southern Baptist Convention. The influence of these years came through the reading of the book that promote the connection between Christianity and social justice; as well as countless hearing and meeting countless ministers from across the country, including his mentor who led a Midwestern United States Church that was known for social justice activity.

He became the full-time leader of *Alpha* in 1983 and found his focus for the practice of social action sharpened by events that occurred in the community where the church is located. On one occasion three persons were murdered near the church while the church was engaged in a revival meeting. He led the men of the church to respond by collaborating with law enforcement agency to provide more presence in the community and outreach to young men and boys in the community. Another incident centered on what was perceived to be an unfair prison sentence given to an African-American male as opposed to a white male accused of a more severe crime.<sup>8</sup> In response, the senior pastor and the church protested and determined to become more involved in the monitoring of the local criminal justice system. The church joined with other organizations in protest and finally helped to have the African-American male released 17 years later. Yet

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<sup>8</sup> The story reports Judge Keith Dean's seemingly despairing prison sentences for two men for probation violation. The first, a poor African-American teenager, was sentenced to life in prison for violation of probation for the original crime of an armed-robbery that netted two dollars and no one was hurt. The second, a well-connected white man, never went to jail even though he repeated violated the terms of probation for the crime of shooting and killing an unarmed prostitute in the back (Brooks, 2006).

another event involved the church's and city's lack of preparedness to respond to the number of persons who would evacuate to the city as a result of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>9</sup> From that experience the senior pastor and the church decided to implement a comprehensive social service program to aid the people of the community.

*Alpha* is able to effectively conduct its program through an extensive staff that has specific assignments. In addition to the lay leaders, these leaders are usually seminary trained persons who are assigned to lead particular auxiliaries of the church's activities that match their particular areas of training or expertise, such as social action, social justices, community transformation, and young people development.

*Alpha* is able to promote and engage the social justice perspective of the senior pastor through a Christian Education program that has a high focus on liberation theology and social justice. In addition to Sunday morning sermons that show a focus on social justice, *Alpha* offers classes that allow individuals to expand their knowledge in spiritual and social matters through a curriculum-based program that teaches the tenets of Christianity through social justice lenses. The program is intended to share the gospel and empower persons to help the needy and oppressed, and confront injustice. Classes are led by trained lay persons who cover a range of subjects from biblical understanding and interpretation, to community and family matters, to understanding the history and the works of the Black Church. In addition, seminars, workshops, and conferences are sponsored throughout the year that covers both spiritual and social justice topics.

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<sup>9</sup> Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5 storm that caused approximately \$75 billion in damages to the United States Gulf Coast in August 2005. The hurricane left a vast majority of property damage, injury, and loss of life in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The concentration of the damage focused on the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, LA in the hours immediately after the storm (White, Philpot, Wylie, McGowen, 2007).

Besides developing knowledge, community engagement is an important part of the philosophy and the work at the *Alpha* church. This engagement is accomplished through the auxiliaries of the church as well as through community development corporations. While the church does maintain the responsibility to work with those persons who are a part of the congregation it does see an equal or greater responsibility to assist those persons who are a part of the community, but not necessarily a part of the church.

In these auxiliaries persons who are members of the church pool their personal expertise and resources in order to serve persons who may or may not be less fortunate than they. These auxiliaries are formed to address specific areas of perceived need. They work to address issues with prisoners and their families, to mentor youth, to assist persons who have been infected by HIV/AIDS and their families and caregivers, and to address temporal concerns such as food, shelter, and clothing needs.

The activities of the community development corporations have allowed collaboration with private and public entities to provide further community services. One such program is a food co-operative effort that will allow partnerships with small-to-medium farmers, Land Grant Colleges and Universities and persons in the community to open what amounts to a hybrid between a supermarket and a farmers' market.<sup>10</sup> The market will bring fresh produce and other products at an affordable price in areas that ordinarily lack such services. In addition, the effort is meant to promote environmental justice and economic development for disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Land Grant Colleges and Universities were established in 1862 as a part of the Morrill Act. The Act allowed for the use of federally owned land to build institutions that teach and support agriculture and "mechanical arts" (engineering) in each state. This was an effort to provide "practical" education for the masses in the United States as opposed to the perceived education for the elite that was liberal arts based (Key: 1996).

*Alpha* is also engaged in public policy issues that relate to unfair lending practices in impoverished communities. The church works with several other congregations and public officials to change laws that allow companies to lend monies or rent products to poor people with enormous interest rates. The senior pastor has held conference with the state, as well as testified before legislative bodies seeking laws to change the corporations take advantage of poor people.

In addition, the senior pastor reaches out to the community rhetorically by participating in radio programming on the local hip-hop music station. He uses this platform to speak words of encouragement and correction to an audience that may not necessarily attend an ordinary church meeting.

The work of the senior pastor and the church are not limited to local concerns of injustice and poverty. *Alpha* is still actively involved in Haiti relief efforts, sending teams of workers to the island periodically to help in the rebuilding process. Monies are also forwarded to the appropriate organizations to provide financial relief. Additionally, the church has adopted a church in western African, sending financial assistance and workers periodically to help with building a structure for meeting and to provide help in strategic planning.

## **Omega**

This church is situated in a predominately African-American neighborhood in a metropolitan city in the Midwestern section of the United States. It was started in 1961 and unlike *Alpha*; *Omega* is a member of a predominately White Christian denomination. The church started with a small number of members who were meeting in congregants' homes and now has over 8,000 people at Sunday meetings. Almost from its inception the church has proudly proclaimed that is proud of both the African roots of the members the congregation and its

Christian heritage. *Omega* is still located in the same neighborhood, but its campus has expanded. In addition, the church owns several other buildings in the community that are used to provide social service for one of the more prestigious divinity schools in the United States.

The leader of the *Omega*, entitled lead minister, is the son of a minister who served with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights struggle.<sup>11</sup> The lead minister grew up in the Midwestern United States and is a graduate of a historically black college. His spiritual influences developed through his father, who leads a church in another Midwestern metropolitan city and other African-American spiritual leaders. He developed a cultural awareness through African-American literature and jazz and Hip-Hop music. The lead minister was the leader at a church in a smaller city in the South before he moved into the leadership role at *Omega*. He is considered a preacher who is able to help bridge the gap between older generations and the Hip-Hop generation.

Unlike the senior pastor at *Alpha*, the lead minister at *Omega* moved into a church community that had already adopted a social action and social justice philosophy in the framework of liberation. The previous lead minister of the church worked for thirty-six years as the church developed. The previous lead minister is the son and grandson of Baptist ministers who helped to shape his theology and philosophy about how church should operate. He received formal ministry training at the height of the Civil Rights movement and was personally mentored and influenced by some of the most notable African-American ministers and community leaders of the day. He is still highly regarded as a Christian minister, academician, and community activist.

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<sup>11</sup> The terms *senior minister* and *lead pastor* are meant to differentiate between the two churches. There is no difference in the title and the leadership ranking of the particular church.



It was the previous lead minister's determination to teach Christianity as connected to African heritage and to show a commitment to the community that caused *Omega* to be one of the leading social justice-centered churches in the country. Under the previous minister's leadership the church grew from 87 members to the present number of congregants. Under the previous minister's leadership many of the present auxiliaries and outreach efforts were developed, including outreach to Africa and the Caribbean. It was during his tenure that the church developed a value system for life based upon the African roots and their Christian heritage. It was during this period that the church also broke gender and sexuality barriers that still plague many churches today.

The *Omega* church places a high value on Christian Education that focuses on social justice and liberation theology. The program is called the Center for African Biblical Studies and offers classes that strive to show the connection between Christianity and the plight of people of color and poor people living around the world. Various course offerings are a part of a curriculum that is designed to expand the knowledge of Christian doctrines and self awareness. Courses such as "African Presence in the Bible" are taught to show persons of color their historical connection to the Christian story. On the other hand, courses on leadership are designed to influence and assist students to become congregational and community leaders who will strive for social change. A number of professional educators over the years have helped the curriculum evolve to meet current interest and needs. In addition, various scholars from around the country facilitate and lecture at workshops and seminars. The curriculum-based educational component is supplemented by a more traditional Sunday School model in which members meet on Saturday mornings for 90 minutes. However, the same Afro-centric approach to Bible study is applied.

In addition, Sunday sermons or pulpit lessons are given through the lenses of liberation theology. Ministers are careful to point out the relevancy of the scripture with a call to action to transform bad situations in the community into a better situation.

The education of the ministerial staff also proved important to the *Omega* church. Because it was a requirement of the church's denomination that ministers must have a seminary degree before they can be ordained, the church made the decision that it would make sure that the ministers of the church received seminary training as they received their practical training.

Yet another important component of the commitment to Afro-centric Christian Education is the church's bookstore, which carries a variety of titles on a wide range of subjects including Christian subjects, social justice, liberation theology, and African-American literature. Congregants are encouraged to purchase and read books from the store. In addition, taped messages from the sermons and Bible studies can be purchased for further review.

It is in the area of community outreach where the *Omega* church thrives. The congregation makes a conscious effort to use its social capital to influence and impact the community in which the church is located.

A number of auxiliaries and social projects were implemented when the previous lead minister and members of the congregation saw an area of neglect or need in the community. For instance, when it was noticed that there was not a grocery store that provided fresh food to the people of the community, the members of the congregation came together and brought fresh produce and goods to the community in a sort of quasi fresh food market. The project grew to the place that persons were allowed to pre-order their grocery needs and pick them up at an appointed time.

In another instance, the members in the congregation recognized that there was a need for early childhood education and child care in the community. Therefore, those persons in the congregation with knowledge of early childhood education pooled their knowledge, contacts, and resources together so that now the church operates two centers in the community that prepares children to enter elementary school. These centers meet all of the standards of state and federal education agencies.

On the other end of the education scale, the *Omega* church offers services that promote, support, and facilitate the pursuit of higher education among people who are from disadvantaged communities. Among the specific services provided are: test preparation, college and career advising, scholarship search assistance, financial aid advising, tutoring, college fairs, and visits and tours of college campuses.

When the previous lead minister and the members of the congregation recognized that there was no adequate, affordable assisted living facilities for the senior citizens in the community they used their social capital to build and operate such facilities. To that end, they now operate two facilities that allow those who need the service to live in a secure environment and receive the assistance they need.

The *Omega* church sponsors a group that works with those who are incarcerated and their families. However, unlike many groups that visit inmates “to have church,” this auxiliary visits to offer training for those inmates who would like to take and pass the General Education Diploma exam. This group also works with the parents of inmates. In one program in this effort, children of women who are incarcerated are taken to the prison at least once per quarter to spend the day with their mothers. Also, unlike many other such groups, this auxiliary has reached out to the federal prison where persons from that particular community have been place a number of

miles away from their home. Maybe the most important effort of this auxiliary is their lobby efforts in the state legislator to ensure that inmates are given the opportunity to learn marketable skills while they are incarcerated.

Two other areas where the *Omega* church took action to meet the immediate needs of persons who were hurting in the surroundings of the church were in the areas of drug and alcohol recovery and HIV/AIDS. Rather than ignoring these crises in the community, the church helped those who were struggling with addiction and infection and took proactive preventative measures. Members are thoroughly trained in these particular areas of intervention. In the case of the HIV/AIDS effort the members are trained by epidemiologist, a representative from the Center for Disease Control, a chaplain, a member of the city's Board of Health, and a family member of someone who is infected. The *Omega* church also offers services in family counseling, breast cancer advocacy and counseling, and hospice education and awareness.

The church also sponsors groups that engage in impacting the development of policies that affect the local community. There is an auxiliary that looks at legal matters. Two of this group's stated goals are to improve the administration of justice by increasing the participation of African Americans throughout the legal system and to inform the church and surrounding community of relevant matters of significant legal impact. Yet another group within the church says that its charge is to address political justice issues. Both groups have worked in protest of what they viewed as the exploitation of workers by major corporations, and unjust decisions by public officials on the local, state, federal, and international levels. In the past, the church made public statements against apartheid in South Africa. The church hosts candidate forums for those persons seeking political office, voter registration drives, and forums to help ex-offenders have non-violent crime convictions removed from their records.

The *Omega* church has extensive global outreach efforts. Members from the church engage in mission trips each year to various parts of Africa and the Caribbean. In addition, the previous lead minister still hosts and leads study groups from the church and community to specific areas across the globe to study the African connection to the scriptures. In addition, but the church's choir took annual trips to sing in churches around Europe.

Both the *Alpha* and the *Omega* churches have proven that the Black Church is still a necessary element in the transformation of individuals and communities to be productive interdependent elements in society. Many persons, and thus the communities where these churches are located, would not get some vital services for day-to-day and long-range living if it were not for the social action and social policy efforts of these faith communities. It is through their undertakings that are aimed at both the spiritual and material well-being of individuals that services are provided that other public and social organization are either unwilling or unable to provide.

Both churches operate using the rhetoric of liberation theology preached and emphasized in the manner they approach delivering social services to the local community and around the globe.

Both churches have a track record that shows that challenges can be overcome. Through their determined efforts the persons involved in the social action and social policy work of the churches were able to overcome resistance to change from both external and internal elements. The external resistance occurs when those who have been in dominant positions in society fight against changing the status quo. The internal challenges occur when those within the church don't want to spend the time, energy, and resources on new ventures and take new avenues to achieve social outreach goals.

Both churches seem to make effective use of their social capital to achieve their desired goals. In both congregations those persons who have expertise or those who are willing to be trained move to the forefront in order to address specific issues and become a part of specific projects when the need arises. There is also proven success in working with other agencies and institutions to accomplish goals. There also seems to be a majority agreement as to how resources should be used to address issues.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

Considering the nature and the environment of the social, economic, and political culture of the day it is imperative that people who share religious cultures (especially the Black Church) become involved in the transformation of individual lives and communities through social action and involvement in the development and implementation of public policy. The social issues that incubate social, economic, moral, ethical poverty are still pervasive. In many impoverished and disenfranchised communities the Black Church is the only institution that still maintains the social capital to be effective in producing desired effects. The critical role of the church is to secure and implement services that will provide for both the spiritual and material needs of persons who are in need.

The Black Church is called upon to maintain its social action roots in order to address the contemporary needs of people. In the same manner that the Black Church spoke about and maintain programs concerning social and civic issues, the church must be an active participant in developing and implementing solutions to issues such as, but not limit to housing, justice, voting registration and participation, education, employment, and addiction recovery.

While the imperative may rest with the Black Church it is important that the message does not remain within the confines of the Black Church. The message of social justice and social action should be disseminated from the Black Church to others who are a part of the faith community. Far too often, the message and attempts at actions that result in change are not generated from those who live or have lived under the conditions that result in poverty and the consequences that it breeds.

In addition, the church must be both cautious and resolved to use the social capital it is afforded effectively and efficiently. Like many public entities, the resources and the access to

further resources are normally limited in scope. Therefore, those persons who make up the congregations must be willing to bring forth their particular experiences, expertise and passions in a collective manner to address areas of concern.

Strategy and long-range planning play a key role in addressing the issues that plague particular communities. Strategic approaches that are proactive rather than emotionally driven approaches that are reactive in nature would probably have a greater impact in the immediate and in the eventual. The goal of social action is to have a lasting effect in the situation and on the people, rather than providing a momentary rehabilitation.

Additionally, social action activities should work to empower people such that they become independent of support systems rather than living as long-term dependents. The idea is to assist persons in the transformation from the position of needing services to the position self-sufficiency. This kind of objective requires that the Black Church move beyond limiting its efforts to addressing the immediate needs such as providing food and clothing to implementing strategies to move persons into healthy living through connecting them to solutions such as employment opportunities or business incubators to encourage and support entrepreneurial efforts, financial education, or family and marriage counseling.

Just as important is the need for the Black Church to be involved in the policy making that will affect the lives of the people who are a part of the communities in which they are situated. It is non-involvement when policy directions are decided or in the election and appointment of those persons who will propose and implement policy that persistently places the Black Church in defensive and reactionary positions. The promotion of equal justice for all citizens is accomplished through both social action and promoting fair and equitable policies.



The involvement in the policy development would seek to insure that the effects of the policy on the lives of people would be considered before it is implemented. Policies cannot be fully effective when they have a negative effect on people. Those ideas that may be cost-effective for political ideals and institutions just may be detrimental to individuals, families, and communities.

The necessary elements to accomplish social goals for church community activism are strong and committed leadership, strategic planning and collaborations with agencies and institutions that share similar goals.

The *Alpha* and the *Omega* model churches both have leaders who are determined to be a catalyst in communities that are in need of social change. These leaders continue to prepare themselves academically, intellectually, and spiritually. They are constantly involved in the public discussion about how to make sufficient improvements to the structures that guide society.

The leaders of the *Alpha* and the *Omega* model churches both admit that their social initiatives were shaped through long range planning. That is, groups designed plans in a manner that fit into the overall religious and social philosophies of the church. There was careful consideration to recognize the human capital and the resources that are necessary and available to accomplish the plan. Those plans were then endorsed and embraced by the necessary constituents before there were any attempts at implementation.

Collaboration with civic and government agencies remain a strong factor in the social efforts of the church. A great deal of what is accomplished is through partnerships with local, state, and federal departments of health, education, and social services. Collaboration with social and civic organizations and other faith communities prove beneficial in efforts to transform communities.

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## Vita

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