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Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church

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ABSTRACT: The contemporary black church is a product of the social movements of the 1960s. Alongside the rapid growth of mega-churches, there are several important features shaping the church of the twenty-first century: (1) a transformation of consciousness that combines black consciousness with Christian ethics; (2) a rapid expansion of the black middle class and the geographic and social relocation of the new middle class; (3) the professionalization of a highly literate laity in terms of the quality of services it demands and the professionalized voluntarism it offers; and (4) changing gender relations evidenced by a continued dependence on women's work and growing numbers of women in ministry, along with a focus on the social problems of black males, especially among the urban poor. The tradition of adaptation to change remains strong as these new features are utilized to combine the work of traditional religion with efforts to pursue social justice and economic equity.

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There's plenty good room
Way in the Kingdom. . . .
Choose your seat and sit down!
—Traditional Negro spiritual[1]

Two-thirds of the way through the twentieth century, the activisms of the 1960s changed the entire society and its diverse spectrum of religious experiences. Some thought these changes significant enough to be called a revolution (Killian 1975). The black community, in many ways, most directly experienced many of the problems—for instance, Jim Crow, poverty, institutional racism, and conscription for the war in Vietnam—that gave rise to the movements of the 1960s. While civil rights and black power activism in the black community provided models for other groups as they addressed their particular hurts and needs (McAdam 1984; Glazer 1973; Deloria 1970), these revolutions and movements of the 1960s sparked controversies and conversations within the religious communities of black America and encouraged the growth of a new black consciousness (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 164-95). As a result, the denominations and congregations controlled by black people in the United States underwent profound changes; the Negro church ceased to be and the black church was born (Lincoln 1974).

Influenced by Malcolm X, leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee started a black power movement that sought to increase the economic position, political power, and cultural self-awareness of black Americans (King 1987; Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). That movement mobilized, reorganized, and inspired black people to transform old organizations and create new ones within the communities they sought to control. In the context of continued subordination, powerlessness, and aggressive state repression, black churches and mosques maintained their historical role as the public sphere (Higginbotham 1993), while the convocations of the black church addressed this new emphasis on power and self-definition and coped with social change.

The most visible recent change in American religion was the emergence of the megachurch (Thumma 1996, 429-526). Although African Americans compose only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they constitute 25 percent of its megachurch congregations. These congregations are bursting with crowds of black baby boomers, or so-called buppies, who have "come home" to church (Lawrence 1996; Roof 1993). The fascination on the part of the press with these very prominent churches often has obscured the older traditions on which they are built and the deeper networks in which they are embedded—traditions and networks that have historically nurtured and challenged American religious culture. Although megachurches are harbingers of more profound changes affecting all black churches in the United States, their newness is more apparent than real. The emergence of a wide variety of new churches and the dramatic transformation of a significant number of old ones at a time when the black community itself is experiencing a major socioeconomic restructuring invites questions about

the current state of African American religion. This article seeks to identify significant features shaping the contemporary black church (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) or "the church of what's happening now"[2] (Gilkes 1995, 180-86).

The civil rights and black power movements changed black communities, and the subsequent rise in black consciousness shook black churches to their very foundations. These changes in consciousness occurred when the consequences of the civil rights movement fostered the economic and occupational mobility of a significant segment of the black population (Wilson 1978). At the same time that this indigenous black middle class grew, changes in the immigration laws opened the doors to an African and Caribbean immigration that changed black neighborhoods, churches, and cultural expression, reinforcing the Afrocentric emphases of many congregations. The mobility—both socioeconomic and geographic—of younger black people meant that, as had happened during earlier migrations, significant numbers of black Americans switched congregations, carrying diverse denominational and local traditions into the more Anglo-conformist, mainstream congregations and thus reorganizing and sometimes reinventing African American tradition. Their increased education contributed to the professionalization of the laity. The larger numbers of church members with graduate and professional degrees offered and demanded new levels of teaching and service, contributing to a proliferation of innovative and diverse ministries and sending their pastors into doctoral and other graduate programs in response to these new demands.[3] As has been the case historically, gender relations were profoundly implicated in all of these changes. Controversies and conflicts surrounding the black family, intimate relations, and sex roles engendered both an assertive emergence of the black church's historical womanist infrastructure and rhetorical and organizational attention to the problems of black males.

Overall, this black church "of what's happening now" is an absorbent and adaptive institution that both fosters social change, pursuing the "dual agenda" of social justice and economic equity (Hamilton and Hamilton 1997), and mediates and interprets the impact of structural transformations on diverse, dynamic, and disadvantaged black communities. As Roof (1993) and others have pointed out, major social changes since World War II have reshaped and restructured American religion overall. However, the demographic trends pointing to a shrinking white American mainline have not applied to black churches. These churches held their memberships during and after the crises of the 1960s (Glenn 1977), but those segments of the black church often dismissed as "sects and cults" and portrayed as deviant (Washington 1973)—preferably referred to as the "Sanctified Church"[4] by black Christians—actually grew in size and in prestige, sharing equally in the status and culture of the black church's denominational mainstream (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). After sketching the impact of

the 1960s on the black church, this article points to these changing trends—heightened cultural and sociopolitical consciousness, rapid mobility, revitalization, professionalization, and gender relations—as aspects of church organization and ethos that both reflect and nurture, through a dynamic and adaptive interaction, the growth and revitalization of congregational life and community presence.

BEYOND THE BLACK MEGACHURCH

There has always been an edifice complex in the study of black churches in the United States. First it was storefront churches; now it is megachurches. The emergence of megachurches in black communities builds upon an older but unrecognized feature of black church history. At key points in the history of black Americans, the large congregations of the black church have been the primary gathering place from which black Americans asserted their humanity and adapted to changing conditions in a racist society.

Social scientists and journalists tend to define a megachurch as a congregation of more than 3000 members (Thumma 1996; Harris 1997; Banks 1997; Caldwell 1997). However, the black church has a tradition of large churches that precedes the Civil War. Albert Raboteau (1978, 196) points out, "Town churches . . . drew slaves from both town and country, swelling in size to hundreds and in a few instances, thousands of members." One could perhaps persuasively argue that First African of Richmond, Virginia, with its membership of 3260 in 1860 would certainly qualify as a megachurch. Clarence Taylor, in his model study *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (1994), identifies a fair number of congregations whose memberships exceeded 3000 in the first half of the twentieth century. Before 1940, northern migration brought the memberships of Holy Trinity, Bethany, Concord, and Mount Lebanon Baptist churches to memberships of 3100, 3600, 8600, and over 4000, respectively (86, 144). When the late Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., assumed the pastorate of New York City's Abyssinia Baptist Church in 1937, "the church had ten thousand members and was one of the largest Baptist congregations in America" (Haygood 1998, 26).

Contemporary black megachurches have usually grown quite rapidly, attracting quite a bit of attention and, occasionally, hostility in their communities. Although they are manifestly middle-class, their worship style reflects the older tradition of the Sanctified Church and other shouting churches. Their music is the best gospel music, and the preaching there is some of the best biblically based preaching to be heard. Furthermore, most black megachurches offer a high degree of affirmation of a black identity in a hostile white society. The church reminds its members "who they are and whose they are," as a counterforce to oppressive social, economic, and cultural circumstances that may make them want to forget.

These megachurches are the most visible evidence of a revitalization and reorganization of black church

life that has been taking place since the late 1960s. There are many other black churches that have experienced explosive growth in both inner-city and suburban locations without becoming megachurches. Their rapid rates of growth point to other, more complex features shaping trends in black churches. These other features—such as congregational culture, volunteer and professional roles, class structure, and theological and cultural values—may point to a larger set of concerns throughout the black community and provide a better portrait of religion in the entire African American experience since "the revolution" has come.

CIVIL RIGHTS, EMPOWERMENT, AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

"When the revolution came,"[5] according to the poet Carolyn Rodgers (1976), a new generation of African Americans questioned the political relevance of black Christian organizations, beliefs, and practices, especially the love ethic of the civil rights movement, challenging the hegemony of the black church in African American life and culture. The Black Muslims (the Nation of Islam), "the largest indigenous population of Americans who have become Muslims," nurtured this challenge (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 388-89; Lincoln 1973). Members of the Nation of Islam often engaged in a practice called "fishing," where they stood outside of black Christian congregations as the Sunday service ended, haranguing church members about the contradictions of Christianity in white America. Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* depicted Malcolm X as offering one such typical challenge:

> You think you are Christians, and yet you see your so-called white Christian brother hanging black Christians on trees. . . . That white man . . . has done every evil act against you. He has everything while he is living and tells you to be a good slave and when you die you will have more than he has in Beulah's land. We so-called Negroes are in pitiful shape. . . . Come out of the sky. Build heaven on earth. Islam is the black man's true religion. (Lee with Wiley, 1992, 246)

The Black Muslims directly addressed the discontents of the ghetto and dissented from the ethical emphases of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The civil rights movement changed America, achieving what Lewis Killian (1975) called an "impossible revolution" by overthrowing a body of law in a nation supposedly under the rule of law. The civil rights revolution was the most significant mobilization of the black church (Morris 1984); it brought the ethics, traditions, and practices of the black church into the foreground, placing a harsh spotlight on the segregated Sundays of American Christians. Violent reaction to a decidedly Christian civil rights movement was usually expressed in church burnings and bombings, and the dissenters pointed to such violence as more reason to criticize and belittle the love ethic of black Christianity. The Black Muslims' criticisms were carried forward by Malcolm X, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others in what came to be called the black power movement.[6] They articulated

the problems of institutional racism, internal colonialism, and economic justice as the central issues to be addressed by black power. They also countered the cultural humiliation and assaults on self-esteem embedded in America's history of racism with calls for black pride.

Black churches responded with organized challenges to white churches through the National Committee of Black Churchmen and demands for reparations as they promoted a black theological revolution within (Wilmore and Cone 1980). The transformation was so profound that C. Eric Lincoln (1974) described the moment as a change from Frazier's "Negro Church" ([1963] 1974) to "the Black Church." He wrote:

> The "Negro Church" that Frazier wrote about no longer exists. It died an agonized death in the harsh turmoil that tried the faith so rigorously in the decade of the "Savage Sixties," for there it had to confront under the most trying circumstances the possibility that "Negro" and "Christian" were irreconcilable categories. The call to full manhood, to *personhood*, and the call to Christian responsibility left no room for the implications of being a "Negro" in contemporary America. . . . The Negro Church accepted death in order to be reborn. Out of the ashes of its funeral pyre there sprang the bold, strident, self-conscious phoenix that is the contemporary Black Church.[7] (105-6)

The successes of the civil rights movement highlighted deeper social problems and revealed a legacy of economic inequality, political exclusion, and cultural humiliation. Voter registration and political organization revealed the connections between political powerlessness, economic disadvantage, miseducation, and the larger structured outcomes that came to be called institutional racism (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Knowles and Prewitt 1969; King 1987; Wilhelm 1971; Wilson 1973; Malcolm X and Haley 1964). The new militant black power rhetoric also masculinized the language of black liberation at precisely the same moment that white women began to challenge sexism in America and the U.S. government published a report on black families that vilified black women, interpreting their labor history as a force emasculating black men (Cade 1970; Gilkes 1987, 1990).

New and expanded opportunities changed the class configurations and collective consciousness of congregations and other organizations as professionalized activists and activist professionals joined the leadership class formerly monopolized by pastors and their allies. "When the revolution came," brothers and sisters in black churches were forced to reposition themselves in a space that was itself shifting. While black churches, in contrast to white churches, did not lose their memberships, the generation we now call baby boomers experimented with a wide variety of organizations and spiritual perspectives before returning "home" (Lawrence 1996; Trescott 1997).

MOBILITY, MIGRATION, AND THE CRISIS OF CONNECTEDNESS

Shortly after World War I, a Baptist deacon in Little Rock, Arkansas, had admonished his daughter as she prepared to migrate north with her husband, a Pullman car porter, "Don't

ever forget your church and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]." As I recorded her life history, I was surprised at how similar was my own father's admonition during the 1960s as I prepared to leave home for college: "I don't care what you decide to believe, remember you can't get anything done in the community without the church." The perception of the church as a source of connection and activist efficacy had not changed across those two generations as the 87-year-old community and church mother and the 27-year-old sociology graduate student faced each other across a cassette tape recorder.

Migration, mobilization, and movement are themes and events that define and describe the black experience and that cluster around the points in black history where class composition and black occupational attainment changed substantially. According to Bart Landry (1987, 19-20), 90 percent of the black population remained in agricultural and service work until World War I. Two world wars and restrictive immigration made black northern migration and entry into the industrial sector possible. The actual "emergence of a new black middle class" was prompted by "two simultaneous and powerful forces within American society: prosperity and the civil rights movement" (70). In the 1960s, this middle class doubled to 28.6 percent of the black population and then grew during the 1970s and early 1980s to 37.4 percent (194, 218). These changing class configurations changed black churches. Greater educational opportunities and career choices fostered a great deal of geographic mobility. This new prosperity also prompted suburbanization, and, as large black middle-class populations moved to the suburbs, usually black suburbs, some churches followed.

The old and new black middle classes met in the churches. Some of the most vibrant black megachurches had former identities as "silkstocking" congregations of the "old" black elite or black bourgeoisie (Frazier 1957) and were transformed by massive infusions of these economically mobile younger people. They were historic congregations and small, having fewer than 100 members. They were part of either predominantly white denominations or established black denominations when a new pastor, who represented the civil rights and black power generation's consciousness, was either called or assigned. While methods of recruitment and revitalization varied, these pastors drew members of the new black middle class who were college students, former members of the Nation of Islam, newly affluent middle-income families, self-critical members of the black bourgeoisie, and migrant and immigrant black professionals seeking a new church home. In some cases, these congregations were spaces where the new and old middle classes and elites had the opportunity to integrate and socialize with each other. In one southern congregation, whose leadership was historically tied to a black-owned insurance company, the church's revitalization and transformation was so sudden and abrupt that working-class members of other churches would come to visit just to see for themselves that the members

were really shouting and saying "Amen" and that a more vibrant worship style was actually taking place. The church had outgrown its building and moved to a larger, more suburban setting. At the end of a particularly exciting church service at the new site, a church leader, a member of the old elite, said to me, with tears of joy streaming down his face, "This used to be the First Church of the Frigidaire!"

Some churches in deteriorating inner-city locations made a conscious effort to reach out to newer networks in the neighborhood as the older church population became commuters from suburban locations. Such centrally located churches also attracted black professional members from the suburbs whose only experience of a black majority was in their Sunday morning service. For black professionals who worked in overwhelmingly white settings, the cultural comfort of these black churches provided therapeutic relief from the micropolitics of being black in a white and unpredictably hostile world; this was especially true for women (Gilkes 1980; Wiggins 1997).

African Americans have traditionally felt deep anxiety over social class divisions, and such anxiety is evident in the popular culture. The negative interpersonal consequences of social mobility where children return from college ashamed of their parents' speech patterns and country ways and where middle-class congregations attempt to suppress the ecstatic expression of their members are sung about in gospel music and preached about from pulpits. E. Franklin Frazier's critique of the old black middle class, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), was so well popularized among African Americans that a pejorative term, "bourgie," emerged and became a hit record by rhythm and blues singer Gladys Knight.

A culturally relevant religious explanation of one's good fortune in the face of so many who had been left behind became necessary. The nature of black social mobility is so precarious ("one paycheck away from poverty") that prosperity is both a blessing and a problem in theodicy. Some of the newer churches or newly expanded congregations became places where an explicit doctrine of prosperity was preached. For African Americans, such a doctrine was a departure from more traditional liberationist and perseverance themes. Such preaching facilitated psychological relocation and integration in the world of affluence.

Mobility in the black community, in terms of both geographic and social relocation, has always produced a crisis in connectedness. For members of Frazier's "black bourgeoisie," staying connected to the African American mainstream sometimes meant membership in two churches, what black people jokingly called a church of "the masses" and a church of "the classes." The rhetoric of civil rights and black power fostered a moral position of solidarity across social class. Affluent black Americans felt more direct social pressures than their white counterparts to maintain a bond with their "brothers and sisters" who did not have their talents, skills, education, or simply good luck. Because of the recency of middle-class expansion, the vast majority of members in the black middle class have siblings and other kin who are not only not

middle class but who also embody the problems of disadvantage, disorganization, and deprivation. The crises of these poor relations may punctuate and disrupt the lives of the affluent, whose response may be shaped by a deep sense of obligation to unusually strong kinship bonds (Hill 1997).

Since before the end of slavery, black communities have enforced the expectation that the educated should lead by teaching and sharing skills. Churches became the settings where connections across class boundaries were fostered. In the revived and expanded churches, this may be done through a wide variety of social programs or ministries. In some cases, black churches have developed private schools. After-school and career-day programs for young people provide mentors who serve as models for occupational attainment and success. Overall, the church became the site for personal, social, and cultural integration and reintegration as class configurations changed.

REORGANIZATION AND REINVENTION OF TRADITION

The growth and mobility of the black middle class in the context of a post-civil-rights- and post-black-power-era church sparked a rediscovery of black tradition. One heard a renewed and transformed gospel music shaped by musicians trained in both the folk traditions of the Sanctified Church and the classical music theory of the conservatories.[8] The black power movement's insistence on black pride prompted many African Americans to cease feeling ashamed of their old-time religious ways. The cultural renewal that came with celebrations of Black History Month and the emphases on black theology in the academy also encouraged a reinvention of the black church as a social and cultural center. Such cultural renewal prompted Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago to declare that its members were "unashamedly Black" as well as "unapologetically Christian." Murals and stained-glass windows with black and brown faces appeared in place of or alongside more traditional images of a white Jesus.

The reorganization and reinvention of tradition were manifested in the revitalization and revival of churches often labeled "seditty,"[9] "bourgie," or "dead." In their study of over 2000 churches, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, 385-88) noted the rise of what they called "neo-pentecostalism" in black churches. Styles of worship that had come to be associated with the Holiness and Pentecostal denominations and congregations "over in the Sanctified Church" could be seen and heard in the traditionally middle-class churches of the 1970s and 1980s. Although Lincoln and Mamiya focused on the rise of this phenomenon in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, it was something that occurred in churches of various denominations and sizes that experienced growth and revitalization as their middle-class memberships grew. Congregations in historically black denominations changed, and black congregations in historically white denominations became more "black," defining their blackness in terms of their commitment to the traditional ecstatic style that em-

phasized what Du Bois ([1924] 1975, 320-40) called "the religion of the Spirit."

College men and women who grew up in the Sanctified Church attended black and white colleges all over the United States. Like most college students, the break from home sometimes meant a break from the home church. The revived and renewed black churches often provided a special call to come home, albeit to a new place, and also provided a space to be black without white hostility and pejorative assumptions. Bishop John Bryant of the AME Church, identified by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, 385-86) as an exemplar for this neo-Pentecostal movement, recruited undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students to one of his early pastorates, a pastorate that became a magnet for a nationally connected corps of new clergy. In addition to AME students, his efforts attracted Pentecostal, Holiness, Baptist, and other students who brought with them a love of ecstatic worship and a wide variety of talents, including musical ones. These new members reclaimed traditions familiar to those raised in "shouting churches" and essentially revived a dead church. Members of the local community jokingly referred to the church as "AMEP" or "African Methodist Episcopal Pentecostal." Sometimes the term "Bapticostal" was also used.

Another source of transformation and revitalization of mainline black churches came from seminarians crossing denominational lines in order to complete internships in approved church settings. Since many black male seminarians arrived at seminary fully ordained, they were not bound to their denominational body in order to fulfill the internship requirements for graduation. Black female students seeking ordination were able to seek out less sexist and more welcoming settings in which to explore their vocations and become ordained. Students from the Sanctified churches often found that there were no approved settings in their own traditions but their preaching skills and other talents opened doors for them in the approved mainline Baptist, Methodist, and African Methodist traditions. These seminarians articulated an ecstatic tradition that older members longed for, securing opportunities for pastoring early in their careers. The permeability of black denominational boundaries that facilitated the adjustment to urbanization and migration for earlier generations served the same purposes for "the golden cohort" as they moved into new church settings with their upwardly mobile age peers—as both ministers and congregants. Combined with an emphasis on the Spirit, these relocations led to denunciations of denominationalism, reflecting a resolution to what Lincoln and Mamiya have called "the challenge of black ecumenism" (1990, 391).

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE LAITY

There is a saying in the black church that "your gifts will make room for you." A larger educated and talented black middle class meant a larger pool of talent available to serve their churches. The quality of services available and this educated la-

ity's demands for professionalized, high-quality service, especially from their clergy, increased dramatically. These demands coincided with the challenge of black power advocates to assume "community control" and to build "black institutions." The poet Carolyn Rodgers describes this process better than any sociologist when she writes the following:

and when the revolution came
the militants said
. . . . . .
. . . we got to
build black institutions where our children
call each other sister and brother
and can grow beautiful, black and strong
and grow in black grace. . . . (1976, 66)

Well-educated black professionals, whose sensibilities and spirituality had been shaped by the zeitgeist of black power, returned to church either with the realization that the church embodied the ideals they had valorized through their political activities or with the determination to make the church fulfill its potential in the black community and the world. Rodgers described these consequences in her poetry:

. . . the militants looked around
after a while and said hey, look at all
these fine buildings we got scattered
throughout
the black communities some of em built wid
schools and nurseries
who do they belong to?

and the church folks said, yeah.
we been waiting fo you militants
to realize that the church is an eternal rock
now why don't you militants jest come on in
we been waiting for you
we can show you how to build
anything that needs building
and while we're on our knees, at that. (1976, 66-67)

The dramatic increase in black participation in higher education that followed the civil rights movement provided a more highly credentialed clergy. Historically, a significant portion of African American clergy pursued their religious vocations as adults engaged in other occupations, often, as jokes and folklore implied, while plowing, planting, or picking in the hot sun. Now African American women and men were answering their calls to Christian ministry while "trespassing" in the corporations and institutions of hostile white privilege where the taint of affirmative action dismissed and trivialized their considerable educational and professional achievements (Parker 1997).

Revival and renewal within these churches challenged members to use their gifts and talents in the service of the church. Those gifts and talents came with a larger number of graduate and professional degrees. Church nurses' units no longer consisted of only nurses' aides and licensed practical nurses but also registered nurses with college degrees. Their traditional roles as attendants to worshippers overcome by the Spirit continued, but they added blood pressure screenings, health fairs, and health education to their repertoire. Doctors and lawyers offered their services as mentors to young people. Accountants and other business professionals assumed roles on trustee boards and as church treasurers. Young professionals with children willingly taught Sunday school, and large churches staffed their independent schools from their congregations. Church social service and counseling centers also found highly talented

and credentialed professionals among their members.

Pastorates in Protestant churches had always represented what sociologists call a "two-person career" (Papanek 1973). They comprised pastors and their wives. Pastors' wives were often missionaries, music directors, stewardesses, deaconesses, and other highly visible church workers who functioned as leaders of the female infrastructure that was the proverbial backbone of the church. They taught the Sunday school and represented their churches at the conferences and convocations that constituted the black church regionally and nationally. Usually the pastors' wives also had professional employment outside the church as nurses, teachers, or social workers. More recently, those second persons in the clergy career had graduate degrees and professional careers in law, medicine, and business; they were a resource for the church and a model for the members. An increasing number of these women discovered their own vocations for Christian ministry, carving out new careers as their husbands' co-pastors or in settings independent of their husbands.

The black church had always been characterized by its traditions of biblical literacy. Even during slavery and immediately afterward, those few who could read made it their business to teach others and to read the Bible for themselves and their communities (Cornelius 1991; Litwack 1979). The rise of the Sanctified Church beginning at the end of Reconstruction in the South was accompanied by elaborate biblically based defenses of that church's ecstatic worship, "in the Spirit," which included shouting and the holy dance (Gilkes 1984; Mason 1969, 36-37). These same shouting saints pushed their children and grandchildren to secure as much education as circumstances would allow. The countercultural dimensions of black religion and the effectiveness of preaching depended heavily on an understanding and knowledge of the Bible that was widely and deeply shared. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, black church members were as well educated as the majority of their clergy or sometimes better educated. The emphasis on Bible study and on teaching in the context of preaching was not simply an expression of Bible-believing fundamentalism (Ammerman 1987, 87); rather, this emphasis represented an extension of a highly elaborated biblically based worldview (Gilkes 1989, 1994). The "churches of what's happening now," the churches with reorganized and revived traditions and a newly expanded professionalized laity, emerged as congregations with an explicitly stated thirst for sophisticated biblical knowledge.

MILITANT MANHOOD AND WOMANIST INFRASTRUCTURE IN CONFLICT

One of the most poignant and lasting images of the civil rights movement is a long line of garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, wearing signs saying, "I AM A MAN." Between 1965 and 1968, black power advocates transformed the language of America, nearly erasing the term "Negro" and replacing it with the term

"black." The problem of the Negro became the problem of "the Black Man" and the rhetoric of black revolution was heavily masculinized. The Nation of Islam had long claimed the term "black," accepting the label "Black Muslims" and declaring Islam to be the "religion of the Black Man" (Lincoln 1973). Indeed, the organization of African American religion became so gendered that Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, 391) point to "the phenomenon of more black males preferring Islam while more black females adhere to traditional black Christianity" as a serious challenge facing the black church. The challenge of Islam, with its male-centered analysis of the black condition, entered the mainstream of black struggle at precisely the same moment that U.S. government reports and social policy targeted the black family and the too-prominent role of educated black women in their families and society (Gilkes 1990).

Ironically, the proportion of black men entering the ministry dropped even as black church memberships stayed stable and began to grow (Glenn 1977). As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, 401) point out, "there has been an increased interest in the ministry among black women, and the decade of the 1980s has shown the largest and most dramatic increases in black women seminarians in major divinity schools." Although, Lincoln and Mamiya continue, "black women are stepping forward to offer their participation in the leadership of the most historic and most independent institution in the black community" (401), they do so, in the words of AME pastor Vashti Murphy McKenzie (1996), "not without a struggle."

Women historically have been the most important agents of organizational integrity in the black churches and communities (Du Bois [1924] 1975; Gilkes 1993). Their role as educators shaped the leadership of women's departments and auxiliaries throughout the diverse denominations (Higginbotham 1993; Barnett 1978; Hall 1997). Church women took early responsibility for leadership, first during slavery as preaching women and through a specialized "women's network" (Andrews 1986; Collier-Thomas 1997; White 1985) and later in the local and national communities through an elaborate network of clubs, national organizations, community education, and sophisticated political lobbying (Giddings 1984; Dodson and Gilkes 1986). Secular and sacred organizations have been served by and have depended upon an extensive "womanist" infrastructure that remained "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker 1983, xi). Much of the leadership of these church women took place in settings outside the church precisely because they were blocked from the pulpits within the church. Rather than defecting from their churches, women stayed and built additional organizations that accommodated their gifts for leadership.

The masculinization of the civil rights and black power struggle came precisely at the wrong moment in African American history. Targeted by both social science and popular culture as deviant and emasculating,

black women were challenged to justify their femininity (Cade 1970) at the same time that they were making the greatest gains ever in education (Landry 1987, 207-9) and a large feminist movement helped to increase the occupational and professional attainment of all women. College-educated black women, unusually suited to take advantage of these new opportunities, began closing the income gaps between themselves and white women and accounted for the economic gains experienced by working-class and middle-class black families.

Emile Durkheim (1995, 167) once observed that "all the men . . ., on the one hand, and, on the other, all the women form what amounts to two distinct and even antagonistic societies." In spite of their competition, "these two sexual corporations" saw themselves as mystically joined together through a common totem. Durkheim's observation almost defines gender relations in the black church. Historical ritual rivalries through Men's and Women's Days, with women usually eclipsing men in their ability to raise funds, are merely hints of deeper antagonisms, what sociologist Orlando Patterson (1995) calls African Americans' "gendered burden of history" (93).

The revitalized churches of late-twentieth-century black America contain large groups of exceptionally well-educated women at the same time that the concern for the crisis surrounding black men has gripped all of black consciousness. Many black megachurches have large staffs that include women. One newsmagazine story featured the picture of the ministerial staff of an 18,000-member church, where the pastor's wife served as co-pastor and nearly half of the staff was female (Harris 1997). Although most black megachurches have a men's ministry or fellowship, where wives serve as co-pastors, there are vibrant women's ministries whose annual conferences and convocations attract a national network of women leaders and participants (Flake 1995). Probably the most masculinist of the black megachurches, St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, pastored by the Reverend Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood, has a ministry to men, the Eldad and Medad ministry, that speaks explicitly to the reclamation and healing of black men. This church also employs a minister to women as part of its professional staff.

Black women take seriously their own issues and problems, and they also pay special attention to the problems of black males in their conferences, national organizations, writings, and everyday lives (Golden 1995; Vanzant 1996). Ironically, the concern that black women evince for the emergencies facing black men—criminalization, joblessness, poverty, hyperghettoization, and social isolation (Wilson 1987)—is not reciprocated by a similar concern for black women by the male leadership of black churches. The perception that black women have survived and succeeded obscures the realities of poverty, welfare, social isolation, joblessness, and single parenting that create unparalleled stress in black women's lives (Flake 1995; Browne 1997). The irony is that while some social scientists may argue that the

better mental health of black women indicates that black men "are not only far behind their white male counterparts, but also significantly worse off than African American women" (Patterson 1995, 61), women's better mental health and educational achievement may indeed be a product of their overwhelming commitment to their churches. For black women, the black church not only continues to function as a therapeutic community (Gilkes 1980), but it also reinforces women's sense of importance by thriving because of women's gifts and support in ways that are observable to the entire community in spite of the institutional sexism.

CONCLUSION: MIGHTY CAUSES ARE STILL CALLING

African American Christianity, in spite of, and perhaps because of, dissenting and competing perspectives, remains a vital cultural force in the United States (Du Bois [1924] 1975; Hatch 1989; Holloway 1990; Wills 1997); its style and leadership have profound impacts on American religion and the larger society. As America turns to the twenty-first century, the black church is advancing through its third century. The new types of twenty-first-century churches and their practices are embedded in a historical self-consciousness that encourages the elaboration and revitalization of African American folk traditions. The highly visible and vibrant black megachurches have their antecedents in the institutional churches that responded to "the great migration," but they incorporate and exploit the growth of education, skills, and middle-class mobility at a larger scale that is new and unprecedented. Because churches are the sites for the working and reworking of tradition, they provide a unique opportunity for understanding human agency in the context of changing social forces and structures. The success of the civil rights movement, the new movements and consciousness it produced, the newly expanded middle class, and the changed institutional arrangements serve to make the black church a more complicated and conflicted context for human agency and creative spirituality.

These changes and their incorporation point to the continuing importance of the black church as a dynamic and adaptive site for the production of culture and social changes. Praying at Atlanta University between 1909 and 1910, W.E.B. Du Bois (1980) declared, "Mighty causes are calling us—the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate, murder, and poverty—all these and more" (21). Du Bois's prayer articulated the tasks facing the black church at the beginning of the twentieth century. The "mighty causes" that call us now are remarkably similar; they remain the "dual agenda" of economic equity and social justice (Hamilton and Hamilton 1997). Addressing these social needs must be done at the same time that the black church does the taken-for-granted work of religion: producing and defending the sacred over against the profane, creating and maintaining appropriate ritual, prescribing and interpreting human life events, and articulating myth, doc-

trine, and ethics—all of this in a context of crisis and change.

The black church currently is faced with a serious crisis of gender relations. More than any other African-descended group in the New World, the black communities and churches in the United States have been shaped by the status and agency of women. The current assertive prominence of women as clergy and educational leaders in the "churches of what's happening now" is rooted in the leadership of earlier generations of women. Some of the current women clergy have come to the revitalized Baptist and Methodist churches from the Sanctified Church, where earlier generations of Baptist and Methodist women found room for their gifts and voices in the face of discrimination and lost skirmishes over the pulpit. This special religious history and women's ability to maintain autonomous religious and secular organizations have existed alongside their auxiliary and backbone service to the church, service resulting in a womanist infrastructure securing the organizational integrity of churches and other black-led associations. This womanist infrastructure finds itself facing an emergent militant black manhood that is highly ambivalent about the importance of the church's women's history.

The black church "of what's happening now" claims connection with and responsibility to the new urban poor, those left behind by the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s and the deindustrialization of the American economy. The issues of poverty, youth education, and black families, along with the new ways in which institutional and interpersonal racism assaults the lives of black Americans, remain central to the "mighty causes . . . calling" the black church. According to Andrew Billingsley (1992), "the Black Church is at the leading edge of the African American community's push to influence the future of its families" (349). The successful response of clergy in the Greater Boston area to the problems of youth violence, the rapid organization of relief through South Central Los Angeles churches during the 1992 disaster, and the high visibility of black churches in southern California as the cutting edge for ethnic diversity within congregations point to the potential of the black church as it faces the twenty-first century.

In the most critical moments of African American life and history, the most defensible and most helpful institution was the black church. There is every reason to conclude that it will continue to be one of the most potent forces for positive social change in a setting of continued social inequality. The ability of black churches to adapt to changing circumstances and the increased self-confidence that the professionalized laity and mobilized women bring to the institution mean that black churches can be increasingly assertive in their engagements with public policy. Success in addressing social problems will require that black churches maintain their independence from white intrusion and control, and resist the white hegemony of anti-feminist backlash and conservative biblicism. The historical role of black churches in creating a globalized Pentecostalism currently provides a context for black

people to negotiate relationships with newer black and brown communities in the United States from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Overall, the black church appears to be persisting in its tradition of adapting to social change at the same time that it pursues the "dual agenda" of civil justice and socioeconomic equality, the "mighty causes" that continue to call. Both the revival and reclamation of tradition across denominational lines and the invention of new ways of worship demonstrate that the diversity and unity of the black church still create spaces where black Americans and their allies may "choose your seat and sit down." Adaptation guarantees that there is still "plenty good room."

Notes

1. Wording depends upon Lovell (1972, 280).

2. The phrase "the church of what's happening now" comes from a recently rapidly growing black church in New England that would not be considered a megachurch simply because its members number too few (under 3000), but it has experienced the rapid growth of the larger churches.

3. Several doctor of ministry programs, modeled on the Martin Luther King Fellows Program of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, provide very direct mentoring for these newer pastors by nationally respected pastors of the prominent older black churches. One such mentor was the late Reverend Dr. Samuel Dewitt Proctor, pastor emeritus of the Abyssinia Baptist Church in New York City, an early megachurch with a membership of over 10,000 during the 1950s.

4. "Sanctified Church" is an indigenous African American term that denotes historically and predominantly black Holiness and Pentecostal denominations and congregations. The term is used by both members of these churches and nonmembers.

5. And When the Revolution Came, from How I Got Ovah, by Carolyn M. Rodgers. Copyright © 1986, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975 by Carolyn M. Rodgers. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

6. The entire leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was present at Malcolm X's funeral in 1965 (King 1987). That segment of civil rights leadership often questioned the tactics of nonviolence and their Christian and philosophical underpinnings.

7. Emphasis in the original.

8. Two national organizations, the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses and the Gospel Music Workshops of America, have very large youth departments. Since most young people in black churches join or socialize with the junior, youth, or young-adult choirs, the choirs function as age-graded features of the churches' social organization, fostering a solidarity within generational cohorts and at the same time providing essential socialization in the folk traditions of the church. These choirs are also the conduits into the churches of more recent trends in contemporary gospel music. It is in these settings where every kind of musical skill is often encouraged.

9. The spelling of "seditty" varies across African American dictionaries. Geneva Smitherman spells it "sadiddy" and defines it as "snooty, uppity-acting, [and otherwise putting on airs]" (Smitherman 1994, s.v. "sadiddy").

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