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THE MEMBERS VOICE PROJECT

The Members Voice Project (MVP) is the nation's most comprehensive survey of African-American congregational life from the perspective of the people in pews. Almost all studies of Black faith communities have utilized a pastor or pastors to articulate perception of their respective religious bodies. This article highlights a new study, utilizing the insight of Black laity and collecting data from more than 20,000 adults in approximately 500 religious groups. Results of this groundbreaking study follow.

Introduction

It is well known that African Americans heavily populate the southern region of the United States. The so-called "Southern Black Belt"—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—has an African-American population exceeding the national average of Black individuals by 12.3 percent. In fact, many states in the southeast, such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, have significant geographical areas with a Black population 25 percent or greater.¹

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¹Came Vernon, "Black Concentration in the South," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 19 August 2001, sec. A, p. 15.

It comes as no surprise then that over half of the Black churches in the United States are located in the south. African-American Christian communities of faith are strong and vital in this region as well as in other parts of our nation. These and other significant findings were confirmed in a study of Black congregational life in 2000. The ITC Project 2000 study of approximately 1900 churches revealed several key results:

- The overall view of Black pastors or pastors of predominately Black congregations is that their faith communities are spiritually alive, and they are excited about the future.
- Most African-American churches are heavily involved in a variety of positive social activities and programs.
- Comparatively few pastors reported that their sermons always focus on social justice (26 percent).
- In terms of community activities and other social programs, congregations are involved: youth programs (92 percent), cash assistance to families in need (86 percent), food pantries or soup kitchens (75 percent), and voter registration (76 percent).
- A majority (64 percent) of all Black clergy interviewed strongly approve of churches expressing their views on day-to-day social and political issues.
- The most divergent issue by denominational groups

was the approval of women pastors. Overall, 40 percent of Black clergy strongly approve, while only 27 percent of Baptists and 23 percent of Church of God in Christ churches strongly approve.

These and other findings reveal important realities of Black congregational life at the turn of the century. The ITC Project 2000 study, assisted by the Gallup Organization, utilized one key respondent to better understand African-American churches. One thousand eight hundred and sixty-three Black pastors were interviewed by telephone during February to May 2000. This random sample was the primary source of information for the ITC Project 2000 study.

Interestingly, the ITC Project 2000 was part of a groundbreaking national survey of congregations from Maine to Hawaii. Faith communities in more than forty religious bodies throughout the United States were examined. The ITC study of Black congregations was a significant part of that overall exploration of U. S. religiosity. Roman Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, and the historically Black churches were all part of this study coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, Hartford Seminary. The overall study was named *Faith Communities Today* (FACT) and has been well documented in a variety of sources.²

Whereas the FACT study and the ITC Project 2000

²See Carl S. Dudley and David Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary, 2001); Stephen C. Razor and Michael I. N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Joseph E. Troutman, ed., *ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 Study of Black Religious Life: Journey Inward Journey Outward*, *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXIX, nos. 1 & 2 (Fall 2001/Spring 2002).

utilized one primary respondent—the religious leader of the faith community—the MVP study focused on the laity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Black congregational life.

The Members Voice Project (MVP) was conducted by the ITC Institute for Black Religious Life (IBRL), in cooperation with the U. S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS), and focused on the laity of African-American congregations. Approximately 500 communities of faith were surveyed during 2004–2005. The project's title, MVP, suggests that the women and men active in these churches were the key respondents—in addition to the pastors. Four-fifths of the people surveyed were primarily active members of Black Protestant churches. The remaining one-fifth of the religious bodies, from among the approximate 500, was either Roman Catholic or Muslim. All three groups—Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims—used a similar questionnaire. The Protestant churches were populated by an overwhelming majority of African-American members as were the *masjids* explored in the MVP study. The Roman Catholic churches were chosen because of their higher percentages of Black lay women and men.

The survey instrument used in the MVP was originally designed by the leadership team of the U. S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS): Dr. Cynthia Woolever and Ms. Deborah Bruce. Their innovative work has explored more than 2,000 U.S. congregations, encompassing 300,000 worshipers across a representative sample of denominations and faith groups.³

MVP was directed by IBRL and funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Drs. Christine D. Chapman, Michael

³See Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

I. N. Dash, Marsha Snulligan Haney, Edward L. Smith, and Stephen C. Rasor are co-directors of the IBRL at ITC. The MVP director was Stephen Rasor with Christine Chapman as the full-time project manager.

Dr. James Cavendish, University of South Florida, directed the study of Black Roman Catholics, and Dr. Ihsan Bagby, University of Kentucky, led the study of African-American Muslims. Mrs. Cecelia Dixon and Mrs. Melody Berry, staff members at ITC, assisted with the project. Ms. Denise Blake of SuccesSolutions also helped with the MVP endeavor.

Research Methods

While the ITC Project 2000 study focused on the key religious leader, the MVP study concentrated on members of approximately 500 bodies of faith. The research plan was designed to survey active adult members of Black communities of faith in all regions of the United States. This tends to be the most difficult type of social research for many reasons—the least of which is complexity, cost, and access. A case study of one or more churches, an analysis of a number of congregations in one location, or even a regional exploration of similar faith groups, is certainly less ambitious than working with 500 religious bodies across the United States. Access to laity in these congregations is even more difficult.

However, since the U. S. Congregational Life Survey (US CLS) team had developed an effective means of working with lay women and men in a diverse group of congregations, the ITC MVP leadership decided to build on their strengths of method and analysis. The US CLS had worked with 100 Catholic, 180 mainline Protestant, 129 conservative Protestant, and nine historically Black denomination-

al churches. They also studied Buddhist, Jewish, and other non-Christian faith bodies.⁴

Their under-representation of Black religious communities was a key concern for the US CLS team, providing a significant opportunity for ITC and its primary social research group, the IBRL. This leadership knew that the complexity and diversity of Black religious communities would be a formidable task but chose to pursue the project with that awareness. For the most part, this has never been done. A wide variety of studies of Black faith groups have been completed with positive and comprehensive results, but a study of more than a few Black churches—their members and not only their pastors—had not been accomplished until this MVP exploration.

It has been reported by Andrew Billingsley⁵ that the Black Church in the United States has approximately 75,000 major congregations. These include the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.); the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A. M. E. Z.); the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C. M. E.); the Church of God in Christ (C. O. G. I. C.); the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.; the Presbyterian Church (USA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; United Church of God; and the United Methodist Church, among others. The Presbyterian and United Methodist churches, unlike the others mentioned, are made up mostly Euro-American members. However, both denominations have significant numbers of individual churches with mostly Black constituents.

The ITC Project 2000 study of randomly chosen pre-

⁴Ibid., 132-134.

⁵Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 352.

dominately Black faith communities concluded that approximately half of all Black churches were Baptist, 20 percent C. O. G. I. C., 10 percent A. M. E., and the other faith groups listed above with approximately 5 percent or less. When the MVP study was initiated, the percentages of predominately Black Roman Catholic and Muslim faith groups were unclear; so it was decided that only fifty of each would be examined in this inaugural membership project. Thus, the research design called for an approximate representation of these various Black Protestant bodies among the 400 examined. Hence the plan was to secure access to approximately 200 Black Baptist congregations, since the ITC Project 2000 study concluded it was this percentage (50 percent) that approximately represents the universe of all African-American faith groups in the U.S.⁶

Likewise, the research design called for similar approximate representative numbers of churches for the other groups: C. O. G. I. C. (80), A. M. E. (40), A. M. E. Z. (20), C. M. E. (20), Black U. M. C. (11), Black Presbyterian (4), and other Protestant groups (25).

Location was also a factor. The ITC Project 2000 study concluded that approximately half of the African-American Baptist churches in the U. S. are located in the south. Twenty percent of the C. O. G. I. C. churches are also southern based. Therefore, regional considerations were factored into the research methodology.⁷

An approximate representation of the other African-American bodies was considered in terms of the south, northwest, north central, and western parts of the United States.

Only 400 Black Protestant churches were considered,

⁶Rasor, *Mark of Zion*, 7-16.

⁷Ibid.

as well as, fifty Roman Catholic, and fifty *masjids*. None were randomly selected. The ITC Project 2000 study worked with a randomly-selected group, resulting in approximately 1,900 churches; but the MVP program used a relational model for selection. Since ITC is a consortium of African-American seminaries, representing the Baptist, Black Methodist, Black Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and other faith communities, it was decided that these collegial and denominational relationships would form the basis of the database used in the MVP study. Churches were initially selected from a general list of A. M. E., C. M. E., C. O. G. I. C., Baptist, and other denominational groups. Key individuals—faculty, denominational leaders, doctoral students, master of divinity students, and local/regional pastors—were contacted to help with the MVP study. The MVP leadership team, having established important relationships with these individuals and groups, asked them to assist with the project. They, in turn, had relationships with the alumni/ae of ITC, and other pastors related to their respective African-American denominational group. These persons were asked to provide access to the 400 Black Protestant congregations examined in the study. The specific research design followed by Dr. James Cavendish and Dr. Ihsan Bagby in their exploration of Roman Catholics and Muslims, respectively, is included in this volume of *JITC*.

The survey instrument was adapted from the US CLS original questionnaire. Three different types of questionnaires were available to the local Black churches: one for the lay men and women, one for the pastor, and one for the business or church administrator (if applicable). The one for the church members had fifty-six questions, with the pastor and administrator versions having 105 and forty-six

respectively. The pastors were provided a package of materials, including survey instruments, pencils, instructions for distribution, and other pertinent information. These were either personally delivered to the various churches or mailed. The local church pastor or individual who provided access returned the completed packages to ITC. Most of the pastors of the 400 African-American churches that participated in the MVP study asked their members to complete their individual questionnaires at one of the primary worship services. This was the recommended method used by the US CLS research leadership team and was utilized by the MVP program. The assumed time for completion of the member survey was approximately fifteen minutes while the other two surveys (pastor and church administrator) could be finished within thirty minutes, most likely in a nonworship setting.

During 2004, most of the 400 Black Protestant groups were contacted about the study with most completing it during 2004. It took the majority of 2005 for the data to be analyzed and interpreted. The results of the study were mailed to the individual congregations together with ideas on how to use the information for mission and ministry. The churches received several reports highlighting their specific strengths, how they compared to other Euro-American and African-American religious bodies, and how they could use the findings for future interests. Several local and regional conferences were held during 2005–2006 to share key conclusions regarding the study. The local church—the active members who sit in the pews of those congregations and the leadership of Black religious communities—had an opportunity to witness and celebrate the various findings of the MVP study.

Some Early Results

More than 13,000 parishioners in approximately 400 African-American Protestant congregations in twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia participated in the MVP exploration. **Four** key "connections" were examined: spiritual connections, inside connections, outside connections, and identity connections. These categories reveal a wealth of information regarding the various churches. The facilities, size, finances, worship patterns, community services and programs, congregational polities, outreach, and community involvement were discovered in the MVP study. These findings were compared with the cumulative data provided by the US CLS project. The US CLS, while diverse in terms of denominational groups, has been less successful among African-American churches. The MVP study focused exclusively on Black congregational life. Therefore, the US CLS and MVP data were compared. Many of those findings, in general and in detail, are reflected in this volume of *JITC*. A few of the overall findings as they relate to the African-American communities of faith are provided:

1. **Spiritual Connections:** understanding the many ways in which worship and faith are expressed within and throughout congregations:
 - Seventy-five percent of African-American lay men and women are growing in their faith;
 - Seventy percent of MVP Black worshipers proclaim their worship experiences help their everyday living; and

- A majority (51 percent) of Black congregational members prefer music from a variety of cultures.
2. **Inside Connections:** exploring worshipers' activities within the faith community and how these connections relate to one another:
- More than three out of four MVP worshipers (77 percent) are involved in small church group activities;
 - African-American laity (65 percent) have a strong sense of belonging to their faith communities; and
 - Black congregants (55 percent) support their churches by tithing.
3. **Outside Connections:** assessing how congregations reach out to serve persons in the community:
- Almost three in four Black church members (73 percent) typically invite others to attend worship services;
 - Thirty-five percent of MVP attendees are involved in their congregations' outreach or evangelism efforts;
 - A majority (56 percent) of African-American laity take part in service or advocacy activities; and
 - Nearly half (47 percent) of MVP church members are "switchers"—individuals who have participated in other congregations of different faith traditions.

4. **Identity Connections:** identifying the various segments of congregations and how members view the future of their faith communities:
- Most Black churches (54 percent) have small memberships;
 - One in three MVP worshipers (33 percent) is married; and
 - African-American worshipers (72 percent) believe there is a clear vision for the future in their congregational setting.

In summary, some of the early results of the MVP study among Black laity suggest important discoveries. Black lay women and men are people of faith; their worship is important; their choice of music is diverse. These active church attendees enjoy belonging to small groups and support their faith communities with their financial resources. Black men and women invite people to their churches and are involved in outreach/service opportunities. The MVP study suggests that many Black congregants are "switchers." Finally, this early analysis of the 400 Black Protestant churches suggests that, while most of their congregations are small in size, they claim to have a clear vision for the future. They feel positive about their congregational life and, hence, many of the Black churches in North America express an affirmative perception of religiosity.

Limitations and Possibilities of MVP

The rewards of being involved in this kind of study are numerous. The men and women who occupy the pews in

Black congregations need an opportunity to add their voice to the local and national dialogue about religious life in the United States. This inaugural study of 500 Black communities of faith has given them that opportunity. Most research conducted in the United States, no matter which ethnic or racial group is involved, tends to be limited to one or a few key respondents when examining individual groups. Studies of Euro-American or African-American faith communities have almost exclusively utilized single individuals from those local religious communities to reveal their internal and external life. Complexity, cost, and access are significant reasons for following this methodology. Engaging a close study of one or a few churches is an important method used and often reveals significant in-depth results. Encouraging many members in a variety of religious bodies to share their insights and collective wisdom—while difficult—is equally significant. However, the results will always provide somewhat less in-depth findings, primarily because of the numbers involved.

The MVP study provides an opportunity to hear from the members themselves, giving the local churches an avenue of offering their various perceptions regarding their congregational life. This study enables local congregations, denominational officials, and others to understand what congregations are doing regarding their spiritual lives, reaching out to their communities, and developing their congregational identities.

Hearing from the women and men in the pew helps educational institutions. Educators in colleges, universities, and seminaries need to be aware of the lay perspective in our religious communities. The specific training of women and men for full-time and part-time mission activities and

ministry endeavors can only be enhanced when those who enable that training have greater appreciation for the local church laity. This MVP study helps to provide some of the elements of that growing appreciation.

There are limits to any study like MVP. The ability to generalize about even a small group of individuals or faith communities is most always complex. To attempt to do so when 400 or 500 religious bodies are involved is even more so. Do we know more about these churches, having heard from the members, pastors, and, in some cases, the administrators? The answer would most certainly be answered in the affirmative. Can we generalize about the entire universe of Black congregational life in America? Probably not. We do know more than we knew previously. Much more needs to be done in future research projects and studies of African-American faith groups. The MVP study tells us a great deal regarding the lay men and women in Black congregational life.

However, there are some important limitations to this study. Any project that involves the Black Church has to take seriously the relational aspect of Black community and congregational life. Access to the pastor and congregants necessitates great sensitivity and effective relational skills. The MVP initiative built on those assumptions with mixed results. Access to a broader and more diverse group of churches, both in terms of denomination and location, was somewhat limited. Many of the faculty, students, pastors, and denominational leaders provided access to various churches and yet, some of the goals guiding the project were not completely realized. The research methods section of this paper indicated that a fairly representative group of denominations would be pursued. In the end, while churches in

twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia were represented, churches in the south and Georgia were over-represented and churches in the northeastern and western parts of the United States under-represented.

The actual number of people who successfully completed the membership survey was on average about thirty-five adults per community. The majority of Black religious communities have small memberships, approximately 100 active members.⁸ If the average of the MVP study had been closer to fifty or approximately half of the typical active members, the results may have been somewhat more representative.

Finally, when comparing one Black faith group to another or even a group of 400 or 500 congregations, there are significant limitations. The size, location, denomination, context, leadership, political perspective, and other factors have to be considered before assuming too much about the results. When comparing African-American and Euro-American churches or faith communities, certain limitations also exist. In the early stages of analysis, when the US CLS population of 2,000 churches was compared to the MVP group of approximately 400 churches, many significant results were identified. However, it should never be assumed that these comparisons are the final word. The US CLS database had 122,049 laity included in their group. The MVP worked with a much smaller number of somewhat more than 13,000. This in no way negates the results but suggests caution when attempting to generalize about both or either group.

⁸Ibid.

Closing Commentary

Hearing from the women and men who practice active ministry and mission in and beyond the local African-American faith community is vital. When pastors, denominational leaders, educators, and students in religious and social contexts hear the voices of active participants in African-American congregational life, they will provide more informed leadership in the faith communities and social contexts of our world.