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PEELING BACK THE LAYERS OF THE ONION: HEARING FROM PEOPLE IN THE PEWS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Introduction

An elemental bond of group identity is belonging to a religious community. For African Americans the church has long played a role of sanctuary. Social conditions placed a special burden on Black churches; they had to be social centers, political forums, school houses, mutual aid societies, refuges from racism and violence, and places of worship.[1] The Black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans is related to their African-American heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath.[2] Core values of Black culture like freedom, justice, equality, African heritage, and racial parity at all levels of human intercourse, are raised to ultimate levels and legitimated by the Black sacred cosmos and were given birth and nurtured in the womb of the Black Church.[3] As the spiritual, histor-

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[1] Christine Chapman and Michael Dash, *The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 2.
[2] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 2.
[3] Ibid., 7.

ical, cultural, and civic nexus of African-American life, the African-American church is viewed as the single most important institution in the Black community. As few scholars and researchers have unearthed data about African-American congregations, there is still a wealth of information yet to be discovered—knowledge that can only be revealed through the primary sources comprising the African-American church: the people in the pews, pastors, and church administrators.

Member Voice Project (MVP) is the nation's most comprehensive survey of African-American congregational life from the perspective of the people in the pews. During 2003-2004, over 13,000 parishioners of Protestant congregations participated in the MVP survey. This article reviews several areas of research on African-American spirituality and congregational life and discusses ways MVP data will be utilized to broaden the scope of understanding about African-American congregational life. Fresh ways by which MVP data contribute extraordinary insights on African-American spirituality and congregational life while linking to and building upon research on the role of religion in the African-American community are suggested.

Building upon and Linking with Project 2000 Research

In 2000, the largest survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States was completed. *Faith Communities Today* (FACT) was an inclusive, denominationally sanctioned program of interfaith cooperation that represented forty-one denominations and faith groups that provided a public profile of American congregations. [4] The ITC/FaithFactor Project

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[4]Carl S. Dudley and David A Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary, 2001), 1-3.

2000 Study of Black Churches (Project 2000) was a significant component of the FACT study. Project 2000 is the nation's most comprehensive survey of African-American religious experience from the perspective of the pastor. A total of 1,863 senior pastors or lay leaders of Black or predominantly Black churches were interviewed by telephone survey. Of the total 1,863 interviews, 1,482 (77 percent) were conducted with the pastor while 381 (23 percent) were conducted with the assistant pastor or senior lay leader.[5] In addition to participation in the national congregational study, as report-ed by FACT, Project 2000 included additional research on Black urban storefront and megachurches as part of the Project 2000 study.[6] Foci of the Project 2000 study covered six broad areas:

- Worship and identity
- Location and facilities
- Internal mission oriented programs
- Leadership and organizational dynamics
- Participants
- Finances

Key findings for Project 2000 included:

- Outreach ministries receive a major commitment of energy and other resources from congregations through-out the nation;

- Eighty-five percent of Black congregations provide opportunities for community service;
- Because of the importance given to this commitment to community, community outreach is as much an expression of faith as participation in prayer groups, liturgical practice, or doctrinal study;
- The activities of congregations in the lives of people—in providing them with food and clothing, building homes, revitalizing neighborhoods, treating addictions, supplying health care—are immense; and
- A high percentage of African-American pastors are well educated. Although a small minority of Black church pastors have a certificate degree or less for ministry, half have attended Bible college or seminary. In the full sample of Black churches having a pastor with a seminary master's degree, nearly a third have continued formal education for ministry.

Link with Social/Public Policy IBRL Study

In spring 2003, the Institute for Black Religious Life (IBRL), Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, conducted research to examine the types and levels of current and desired Black church interest in issues identified by the White House faith-based initiative: at-risk youth, prisoners and their families, elders in need, substance abuse, wealth creation, financial education, church/state separation, role of fathers, rites of passage, hip-hop music/entertainment, and Afrocentric culture.[7] The purpose of the study was to begin an examina-

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[7]See Christine Chapman, "The Black Church: Charitable Choice, Devolution, and Obstacles," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXXI, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall 2003/Spring 2004): 247-277.

tion of the role of religion in social and public policy as identified by the Black Church. Seminarians from diverse backgrounds completed the survey.

The policy survey examined three aspects of involvement and interest in social issues and public policy on the part of the participants' churches: current involvement, desired involvement, and sermon topic. In order to determine the demographics of participants, gender and age, nationality, denominational affiliation, location (state) of the participants' home church (many of the seminary participants attend seminary away from their home state), whether the church was urban, rural, suburban, size of congregation, and the pastor's educational level were observed. The intent was to identify predominant characteristics of the churches and congregations of the seminarians participating in the survey. Two hundred respondents participated in the survey with the following findings:

- Participants were predominantly male (55 percent);
- Age: 34 percent between 30-39; 28 percent 50 and older; 22 percent 40-49; 16 percent below 30;
- Ninety-eight percent of participants were African American with 2 percent Black non-U.S. citizens;
- Twenty-five percent were Baptist; 15 percent African Methodist Episcopal. The remainder were evenly distributed among Christian Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Church of God in Christ, and Disciples of Christ;
- States of the home churches represented were predominately southern: Georgia, Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. Northeast/Mid-region: New

Jersey, New York, and Virginia. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said their home churches were in Georgia;

- Over 30 percent of the participants stated their churches were in urban areas, with the next largest group from suburban locations. Less than10 percent responded that they were rural;
- Thirty-five percent of the respondents were affiliated with congregations with over 350 members. The remaining churches were small in size—between 50 and 99 members; and
- Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported pastors with education levels of seminary or higher. Since the participants in the policy study were seminary students, this demographic data had little to no significance.

A central theme of religiosity within the Black Church is the spiritual and community outreach connections. The policy research demonstrated that a desire to be involved with ministries supported by the White House faith-based initiative is high among seminary-trained religious leaders. Ministries identified by the faith-based initiative reported a desired average increase of 68 percent over current levels of ministry activity. Of special note is the desired increase of 111 percent for activities related to substance abuse. All respondents also indicated a desired increase in the levels of activity for ministries related to social and public policy. Of the six social policy areas surveyed, access to health had the highest interest (77.7 percent), followed by financial education (75.8 percent), wealth creation (74.8 percent), minority representa-

tion (71.2 percent), affirmative action (64.3 percent) and welfare reform (53.9 percent).[8] But for the researchers involved in this follow-up study to Project 2000, the question became, "In what ministries related to social and public policy do the people in the pews want to be involved?"

"Faith-based" has become such a common qualifier for "social services" that it is easy to assume the concept is widely understood among church members. When MVP researchers were asked to participate in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (US CLS), of particular interest was the inclusion of survey questions related to types of social and public issues. MVP thus added the following question to the original U.S. Congregational Life survey instrument:

> In which of the following ministries would you like your congregation to be involved? (Mark **all** that apply.)
> • Housing for senior citizen programs or assistance
> • Other senior citizen programs or assistance
> • Prison or jail ministry
> • Counseling or support groups
> • Substance abuse or twelve-step recovery programs
> • Day care, pre-school, before- or after-school programs
> • Other programs for children or youth
> • Emergency relief or financial assistance

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[8]Data generated from the follow-up research for the spring 2003 White House initiative by the Institute for Black Religious Life have been presented by the writer at the following professional conferences: "Getting a Piece of the Faith-Based Pie," American Sociological Association, section on Sociology of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, August 2003; "Research Report: Black Religious Life in America," NAACP Eighth Annual National Religious Leadership Summit, Atlanta, November 2003.

- Economic development
- Financial education
- Health-related programs and activities
- Activities for unemployed people
- Political or social justice activities (voter registration, etc.)

Below are data reported to MVP by the more than 13,000 Protestant parishioners regarding levels of participation in social service ministries.

- Housing for senior citizen programs or
  assistance   33%
- Other senior citizen programs or assistance 29%
- Prison or jail ministry   34%
- Counseling or support groups   41%
- Substance abuse or twelve-step
  recovery programs   22%
- Day care, pre-school, before- or
  after-school programs   32%
- Other programs for children or youth   36%
- Emergency relief or financial assistance   22%
- Economic development   21%
- Financial education   21%
- Health-related programs and activities   36%
- Activities for unemployed people   33%
- Political or social justice activities
  (voter registration, etc.)   26%

Congregations develop a variety of ways to assist people in times of special need, sometimes helping their own members,

but often reaching out to assist others in their communities.[9] In 2001, the FACT survey provided data regarding the ways congregations across the nation reach out and supply a network of human services. The proportion of U.S. congregations represented in FACT is not possible to determine with precision because there is no accurate count of the total number of congregations in the United States. Estimates range from 300,000 to 350,000. Using a mid-point estimate of 325,000 total congregations means that the 260,000 congregations in FACT denominations and faith groups represent 80 percent of U.S. congregations.[10] Below is a chart indicating the percent of FACT congregations supporting at least one social outreach program.[11]

- Migrant/Immigrant   18%
- Employment Related   23%
- Voter Registration/Education   30%
- Social Issue Organizing   33%
- Health Education   33%
- Tutoring   35%
- Substance Abuse   35%
- Day care, Pre-, After-School   37%
- Prison Ministry   41%
- Elderly Housing   42%
- Senior Citizen   46%
- Counseling/Hotline   47%
- Hospital/Nursing Facilities   48%
- Thrift Store/Donations   62%
- Food Assistance   84%
- Cash Assistance   90%

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[9] Dudley, *Faith Communities Today*, 46.
[10] Ibid., 3.
[11] Ibid., 48.

In nearly all categories that data were collected in both the MVP and FACT surveys about outreach ministries (employment related, substance abuse, day care [pre- after-school], prison ministry, elderly housing, senior citizen, counseling/hotline, and cash assistance) percentages of MVP congregations' involvement in social outreach ministries was lower than reported for national averages in the FACT survey. Since the FACT data represent information gathered from pastors and MVP, the perspective of the people in the pews, this discrepancy in perceptions of amounts of social outreach ministry, however, requires additional research.

Although the majority of congregations develop resources to respond to basic human needs in emergency situations, denominational preferences emerge around particular ministries. The chart below shows the total number of programs supported by each denominational group within the FACT study. The number in the right column is the average number of outreach ministries. The chart reflects both the faith commitment of congregations and their location in communities of need:

- Liberal Protestant   7.1
- Moderate Protestant   6
- Evangelical Protestant   5.8
- Historically Black   8.7
- Migrant/Immigrant   6.4
- Catholic and Orthodox   6.4
- World   6.4

The IBRL policy study demonstrated that the links between outreach ministries and social and public policy issues have broad implications. One broader sociopolitical

context having particular implications for studying the spiritual dimension of congregational outreach is devolution. Devolution is the decentralization of the social safety net and the transfer of social responsibilities to the private sector, a trend that Cnaan, Wineberg and Boddie call the "newer deal"—reversing the New Deal welfare policies that emerged from the Depression and reached their political apex in the 1960s.[12] The proliferation of federal programs during the 1960s and 1970s produced marked expansion of the nonprofit sector.[13] Alexander considers the devolution of government policy part of a larger reform movement deemed the "new public management."[14] The ideology of this movement is guided by two basic assumptions:

- the efficiency of markets and the value of competition as a strategy for enhancing organizational performance; and
- the conception of management as a generic view derived from the private sector.

These two trends have generated stronger cooperation between local governments and nonprofit social service organizations, under the direction of leaders exhibiting the values of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness.

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[12]See Ram A. Cnaan, Robert J. Wineberg, and Stephanie C. Broddie, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[13]See Elaine B. Backman and Steven Rathgeb Smith, "Healthy Organizations, Unhealthy Communities?" *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 10 (2000): 355-373.

[14]See Jennifer Alexander, "The Impact of Devolution on Nonprofits: A Multiphase Study of Social Service Organizations," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 10, no. 1 (1999): 57-70.

A foundational assumption of the movement toward devolution is that the impersonal and inflexible nature of government, especially the federal government, renders it incapable of waging an effective war against poverty. A corollary assumption is that private sector efforts, particularly faith-based ones are inherently more effective and can mobilize resources with greater efficiency.[15] While empirical research on faith-based nonprofit organizations is limited, there is available anecdotal research, which is difficult to access. The dearth of quantitative research examining the desire for outreach ministries related to faith-based programs eligible for federal funding is one reason the MVP study sought data to understand the congregation's desire for these types of ministries. Additionally, MVP sought data to understand the connections between types of ministries supported by Black Protestant congregations.

Spiritual Link with Everyday Lives

The FACT survey highlighted that the majority of congregations in the U.S. develop resources to respond to basic human needs in emergency situations, and Black Protestant congregations supply the greatest number and type of outreach ministries. But the link between social action programs and spiritual dynamics is uncharted terrain although a cluster of studies has significantly contributed to understanding of the faith community's involvement in public life. Four major national congregational surveys[16]—the Independent

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[15]Ibid., Unruh and Ronald J. Sider, "Saving Souls," 11.

[16]Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 273-274. [An electronic book].

Sector study,[17] America's Religious Congregations, [18] the National Congregations Study,[19] the Organizing Religious Work Project,[20] and the Faith Communities Today Study[21]—paint complementary portraits of congregations' ministry priorities and charitable activities. Alongside these national surveys are many regional and local studies examining congregational civic involvement, including the seminal *Varieties of Religious Presence* that analyzed congregations in Hartford, CT;[22] analysis of the use of space among Chicago congregations by the Community Workshop on Economic Development;[23] Wineburg's longitudinal research in Greensboro, NC;[24] Ammerman's study of twenty-three congregations in nine communities undergoing significant change;[25] the Urban

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[17]See Virginia Hodgkinson and Murray S. Weitzman, *From Belief to Commitment: The Community Service Activities and Finances of Religious Congregations in the United States* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 1993).

[18]See Susan K. E. Saxon-Harrold, *America's Congregations: Measuring Their Contribution to Society* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 2000).

[19]See Mark Chaves, "Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform: Who Will Take Advantage of 'Charitable Choice'?" *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 6 (December 1999): 836-846.

[20]See Nancy Ammerman, "Doing Good in American Communities: Congregations and Service Organizations Working Together," *Research Report for the Organizing Religion Work Project* (Hartford, CT: Institute for Religion Research, 2001).

[21]See Dudley, *Faith Communities Today*, 2001.

[22]See David Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in the Public Life* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984).

[23]See Community Workshop on Economic Development, *Good Spaces and Good Work: Research and Analysis of the Extent and Nature of the Use of Religious Properties in Chicago Neighborhoods* (Chicago: Inspired Partnerships Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, 1991).

[24]See Robert J. Wineberg, "Local Human Services Provision by Religious Congregations: A Community Analysis," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1992): 107-118.

[25]See Nancy Ammerman, *Congregations and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Institute's survey of DC congregations;[26] examination of rural church responses to poverty;[27] a capacity study of congregations in California;[28] Wuthnow's portrait of congregational linkages with nonprofits in Lehigh Valley, PA;[29] Bartkowski and Regis's studies of the relief efforts of congregations in Mississippi;[30] McRobert's analysis of congregations in Four Corners, a Boston neighborhood;[31] a census of the community-serving activities of Philadelphia congregations;[32] and a seven-city study of congregational activity.[33]

Studies that highlight particular forms of faith-based social outreach include a study of fifteen Philadelphia area Protestant churches with active outreach programs;[34] Church and Community Project involving 111 churches developing social ministries;[35] Sherman's research on congregations involved

[26]See Tobi Jennifer Prinz, "Faith-Based Service Providers for the Nation's Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 65-78.

[27]See Katherine Amato-von Hemert, "Between Imprisionment and Integrity: Rural Churches Respond to Poverty and Policy," *Social Work and Christianity* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 188-217.

[28]See Scott D. Anderson, John Orr, and Carol Silverman, "Can We Make Welfare Reform Work," *The California Religious Community Capacity Study: Final Report* (Sacramento, CA: California Council of Churches, 2000).

[29]See Robert Wuthnow, *Linkages between Churches and Faith-Based Nonprofits* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, 2000).

[30]See John P. Bartkowski, John P. Regis, and Helen A Regis, "Religious Civility, Civil Society, and Charitable Choice: Faith-Based Poverty Relief in the Post-Welfare Era," in *Faith, Morality, and Civil Society*, ed. Dale McConkey and Peter Lawler (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 132-148.

[31]See Omar McRoberts, "Understanding the 'New' Black Pentecostal Activism: Lessons from Boston Ecumenical Ministries," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 47-70.

[32]See Ram A. Cnaan and Stephanie C. Brodie, "Philadelphia Census of Congregations and Their Involvement in Social Service Delivery," *Social Service Review* 75, no. 4 (2001): 559-580.

[33]See Unruh, *Saving Souls*, 2005.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Carl S. Dudley and Thomas Van Eck, "Social Ideology and Community Ministries: Implications from Church Membership Surveys," in *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, ed. Kenneth Bedell and Alice Jones (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 5-11.

in welfare-to-work partnerships;[36] Harper's investigation of twenty-eight churches doing model community development;[37] and Day's case studies of ten African-American Philadelphia churches engaged in economic development.[38]

Spiritual Link with African-American Families

According to the 2000 Census, the nearly 35 million African Americans in the United States represent 12.3 percent of the population.[39] Research on families in America found African Americans are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce and more likely to live in single-parent, mostly mother-headed families.[40] This investigation included several noteworthy features of African-American families. First, African-American families have a long history of being dual-earner families, resulting from economic need; employed women have played an important role in the African-American family. They also have more egalitarian family roles. Black men have more positive attitudes toward working wives, assume a slightly larger share of household labor, and spend more time on domestic tasks and child-care activities.[41] Second, some evidence indicates a greater likelihood

[36]Amy Sherman, "A Survey of Church-Government Anti-poverty Partnerships," *American Enterprise* 11, no. 4 (2000): 32-33.

[37]See Nile Harper, *Urban Churches, Vital Signs: Beyond Charity Toward Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

[38]See Katie Day, *Prelude to Struggle: African American Clergy and Community Organizing for Economic Development in the 1990s* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

[39]See U.S. Census Bureau, [table online] (Washington, DC: GPO, 2000, accessed 1 May 2006); available from http://www.census.gov; Internet.

[40]See Bryan Strong, Christine DeVault, and Theodore F. Cohen, *The Marriage and Family Experience: Intimate Relationships in a Changing Society*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 87-89.

[41]See Vonnie McLoyd, Ana Marie Cauce, David Takeuchi, and Leon Wilson, "Marital Processes and Parental Socialization in Families of Color: A Decade Review of Research," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, no. 4 (November 2000): 1070-1093.

of spousal violence and lower levels of reported marital happiness.[42] Third, kinship bonds are especially important, for they provide economic assistance and emotional support in times of need.[43] Fourth, African-American families have a strong tradition of familism with important roles played by intergenerational ties.[44] Fifth, African Americans value children highly. Finally, African Americans are more likely than whites to live in extended households, containing several different families.[45] Black children are much more likely to live in their grandparent's household or to have grandparents living with them in their parent's household.[46]

Examining the supportive relationships with church members among African-American families will be an important focus of qualitative analysis of MVP data. Observing socialization activities, reflecting African-American cultural themes will reveal possible links between Afro-cultural socialization patterns within African-American congregational life. We will also explore the links between age and gender alongside of the frequency of receiving support from church members. This will give relevant findings on family solidarity and possible links with church networks, an important component of cultural capital, another area of MVP research focus.

[42]Ibid.

[43]See Robert J. Taylor, Linda M. Chatters, Belinda Tucker, and Edith Lewis. "Developments in Research on Black families," in *Contemporary Families: Looking Forward, Looking Back*, ed. Alan Booth (Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations, 1991).

[44]Ibid., Stong et al, 87.

[45]Ronald L. Taylor, ed. *Minority Families in the United States: A Multicultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).

[46]See U.S. Census Bureau, "Grandparents Living with Children: 2000" [table on-line] (Washington, DC: GPO, 2000, accessed 1 May 2006); available from http://www.census.gov; Internet.

Spiritual and Cultural Capital Links

Social capital—which includes broad social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals—has become an influential concept in debating and understanding the modern world.[47] The concept of social capital has resonated across academic disciplines and has moved quickly into the realm of public discourse. There are several suggested reasons for the popularity of this concept: primarily, a growing concern to revalorize social relationships in political discourse; to reintroduce a normative dimension into sociological analysis; and to develop concepts that reflect the complexity and interrelatedness of the real world.[48] Secondly, the concepts of trust and networks are intrinsic to defining social capital. Robert Putnam, the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, is credited with popularizing the concept of social capital in the U.S. Putnam defines social capital succinctly as "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objects."[49] In other words, interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks and the relationships of trust and tolerance can bring great benefits to people.[50]

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[47]Tom Schuller, Stephen Baron, and John Field, "Social Capital: A Review and Critique," in *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Tom Schuller, Stephen Baron, and John Field (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), [1].

[48]Ibid, 2.

[49]See Robert Putnam, "Who Killed Civic America," *Prospect* (March 1996): 66-72.

[50]See Robert Putnam, "Social Capital and Civic Community" [essay online] (accessed 1 May 2006); available from http://www.infed.org/thinkers/putnam.htm; Internet.

How, then, can these three "features"—networks, norms and trust—be applied to civic life as experienced in African-American Protestant congregations? Few areas of American scholarship have produced as much exciting new work in recent decades as African-American studies. An outpouring of scholarship on slavery, emancipation, late-nineteenth-century race politics, and southern segregation dominated studies through the 1970s. But as scholars moved forward to explore twentieth-century African-American history, the examination of Black life and culture provide a central focus. These changes in scholarly focus were paralleled by shifts in interpretation and analysis. A previous emphasis was on physical and institutional structures of Black community and the degree to which whites regulated and controlled Black life. Later studies emphasized an "agency model," demonstrating the extent to which slavery and freedom shaped and controlled destinies. Gilbert Osofsky,[51] writing on Harlem, and Allan Spear,[52] writing on Chicago, for example, concentrated on the creation of ghetto and Black urban life generally. Current studies, though, reflect a shift back to Black southern roots and an emphasis on internal focus, on kinship and communal networks, class and culture, and the importance of church and theology in Black communities. Scholars are beginning to recognize the degree to which religious conviction empowered African Americans and moved them to action. Project 2000 clearly found that people within historically Black religious institutions are driven by their faith to help and serve others. A particular focus for qualitative analy-

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[51]See Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1996).

[52]See Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

sis of MVP data is examining the extent to which social and cultural capital are empowering or constraining congregational life and social outreach ministries.

Women and Leadership Issues

The African-American church is known as a focal point for social involvement within the African-American community. Seventy-four percent of the respondents completing the MVP survey reported they hold at least one leadership position in their congregation (such as governing board, committee, choir or usher, church school teacher, etc). This is nearly double the average reported by US CLS congregations. Why are African-American congregations so leadership heavy? How is leadership perceived in African-American congregations? How does ministerial leadership contribute to the support or constraint of leadership for people in the pews? What is the role of gender in the perception of leadership roles within the congregation? These are beginning inquiry questions MVP researchers are utilizing to examine leadership, discourse, symbols, and mentoring in producing lay leaders and shaping the beliefs and values of the congregation. Of particular interest is exploring the role of women in church leadership, internal systems of support for women to exercise leadership, and spiritual gifts as part of their spiritual development.

Although Black churches throughout history have been involved in seeking political equality and justice for African Americans, the inequality of Black women in terms of class and gender remains an unresolved issue. Even though the principal programs of the Black Church rely disproportionately on women for their support and success, all of the tra-

ditional Black religious denominations tend to have basically female congregations and mostly male leadership. Some denominations with typically middle-class congregations, most notably the Black Methodists, who have displayed less gender bias when compared to Holiness denominations, who in turn, appear to demonstrate less class bias and tend to attract poorer, less educated African Americans. MVP, however, is providing cutting-edge data regarding participation of Black women in their churches.

The role of women as fully ordained clergy has always been subject to controversy. For the most part, men have monopolized the ministry. Many of the founders of Black churches ignored the unfairness of this practice, even though it is analogous to the injustices of the white society against African Americans.[53] In recent years, many traditional denominations have ordained a greater number of women ministers, but organizational hurdles have placed a stained glass ceiling on their opportunities to attain either pastorates in larger congregations or higher ranking ecclesiastical posts. Black women have been limited within their institutions in leadership roles, which have served as the primary mechanism for entrance into the political arena by many prominent Black leaders such as Andrew Young, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Jesse Jackson.

Even with the prestige of Black women at national church conventions and in spite of the growth of Black women's public speaking capability, the distinction between speaking and teaching as female roles and preaching as a

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[53]See Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982).

male role is the norm in many Black churches. It has been suggested that this sexual division of labor was an accommodation to the dominant culture's reading of biblical texts on women's roles.[54] It has been documented that on all organizational levels women are concentrated in traditional women's areas of work rather than the top leadership positions of churches. They are accorded greater participation on the decision-making boards of smaller churches but not larger ones. Women are found in the membership and on the staffs of agencies that are connected to missions and education, the historic channels for women's work, but seldom in the ones that could serve as spring boards to political activity.[55] Black women have been rewarded for accomplishments in supportive roles.

Social welfare was not considered a primary role for men in African-American culture and therefore this activity was delegated to the women of the church[56] who founded ministries catering to urban areas. In these ministries they preached, ran day care and food distribution centers, and educated those who sought them out. Fund raising was only one of the ways women demonstrated that they in essence were the foundation of the church, even though men were in the forefront and received most of the recognition. Money was the means to attain success for African missions, and women were the principal players in raising it. Because opportunities for women within the traditional

[54]See Jualyne E. Dodson and Cheryle Townsend Gilkes, "Something Within: Social Changes and Collective Endurance in the Sacred World of Black Christian Women" in *Women and Religion in America*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

[55]See Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

[56]See William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

ministry of Black churches were limited, the missionary pro-fession was appealing to many African-American women. It gave them the opportunity to pursue leadership roles not normally available in America. In addition to the primary MVP survey instrument utilized by parishioners, church pastors and church administrators were also surveyed. Data derived from the leader and administrator surveys will pro-vide evidence regarding current roles of women in leader-ship positions of the church. Additional focus will also be given to the role of the church in social networks of elder-ly African Americans. Early MVP findings suggest that church-sponsored activities are vital to the social networks of elderly African Americans.

Conclusion

At the time of this article, MVP researchers have had access to the cumulative data for approximately three months. It is clear that further exploration of the data will be like peeling back the layers of an onion with many lay-ers of data, like the layers of skin on an onion, needing to be examined. Early stages of analysis by MVP researchers have been initiated in the following areas: examining the spiritual link with everyday lives; spiritual and cultural cap-ital links; women and church leadership; and the spiritual links with social and public policy. In both MVP and the Project 2000 study, we found that people are driven by their faith to help and serve others. Although we can celebrate the amount of community outreach in which Black reli-gious groups are involved (greatest among all religious groups), there is much we do not know about the type, degree, quality, and impact of these community outreach

programs and the ways that vital Black spirituality plays a role. Unfortunately, while nearly everyone can see bits and pieces of this work, overall we know little about how much of this work takes place. We know that there is much happening, but how much of it, what is being done, how it is funded, and a host of other questions are unresolved concerns. We also know very little about the success rate of these programs. In many ways, this lack of data presents few problems, but in other ways it hinders the ability of faith groups to do their work and do it well. Only when research confronts the full range of community outreach within the Black Church will we begin to better understand the behavior and decision-making of these organizations and, as a result, offer new insights for more effective transformations.