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**THE BLACK CHURCH: *MISSIO
DEI* AND GIVING**

Introduction

The social crisis within African-American communities demands an active fellowship of believers. Congregational presence alone, however, is not adequate; congregations must move from presence to active engagement. How to make this transformation is one of the key issues this essay addresses. Given the new social realities, congregations can no longer be content with only providing acts of benevolence (such as emergency food and clothing), but must address the systemic issues that oppress, dehumanize, and contribute to death, not life, in local communities as well as the larger world. It is unknown if congregations are willing to rethink and change current priorities in an effort to address the important missional challenges beyond their own needs.

An incarnational model of mission in today's society, one in which a congregation identifies with the world (local, national, and international) through a commitment to Jesus Christ, holistic missional involvement, and intelligent Christian action, enables transformation. Because "incarnational" describes the manner and method by which Jesus engaged the world, it is also descriptive of the nature and means by which congregations live out their missional understanding. To address current challenges, congregations need to position themselves theologically, spiritually, humanly, culturally,

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and physically for emerging opportunities for engagement in Christian missions. According to Gayraud Wilmore, the purpose of missiology is to "demonstrate the coherence between research and reflection and practical knowledge for effective and faithful action in the world."¹ The primary task of the congregation in this perspective is to engage faithfully, relevantly, and effectively in the *Missio Dei* for the transformation of persons, institutions, systems, societies, and the wider world. This is accomplished in Christian contextualization.

Contextualization and Commitment

The concept of contextualization is generic in essence and is utilized by all faith communities to impart their teachings in the hearts and minds of believers; however, its use within the life of Christianity may be defined as follows:

Contextual theology is the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the word of God and historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the lordship of Christ. As members of the body of Christ interpret the Word using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.²

¹Gayraud S. Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 357.

²Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextual Theology As Incarnational Mission," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing Company, 1989), 12.

The goal of every congregation in mission of the Christian church throughout history, in every situation and location, is a contextualized church. This is the only way that the Christian church can make sense to those who are outside of the faith. History contains numerous examples of churches that did not take seriously the task of contextualization, and as a result, when threatened by internal and external forces, succumbed and eventually died.

As African-American Christians and Christian faith communities grow in their awareness of social analysis and engage in hermeneutical practices, they realize that Christian theology for centuries is only one form of contextualized European and North Atlantic theology. The mandate to liberate people and communities from traditional understandings and to appropriate anew God's purpose in mission is the essence of the Great Commission.

Contextualization, as evidenced in both Hebrew and Greek studies, affirms culture, human experience, and the world as a place of God's revelation. Resulting from the influence of the protest content of African-American Christianity's mission and the guidance of the Holy Spirit,³ the primary dimensions of African-American Christian faith are expressed through seven key components of the Christian mission: **justice** (*dikaionia*), **proclamation** (*kerygma*), **witness** (*martyria*) **fellowship** (*koinonia*), **worship** (*leiturgia*), **teaching** (*didache*), and **service** (*diakonia*). In contemporary times, the encounter of culture and Christianity challenges the church's self-understanding and praxis in each of these areas. African-American Christian congregations maintain commitment to the mission of the church in the world.

Concern for the involvement in the *Missio Dei* requires today's

³See J. Deotis Roberts, *The Prophethood of Black Believers: An African American Political Theology for Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), xii, 5-8, who speaks of the church as an extension of the incarnation.

congregations to engage a variety of lifestyles issues (evangelism, church growth, church planting, ecumenism, interfaith and inter-religious relations, translation and interpretation, mission leadership development) in a new era of post-modernity. Yet, none of these function independently from church members who volunteer their service and/or their financial support. While volunteer service is a prominent form of church giving, our primary concern is with Christian giving expressed through offerings, tithing, fund raisers, and other financial donations used to finance Christian missions through congregations. Both the human and financial factors are critical to the contextualization process.

Whether or not the financial implications of contextualization are recognized, awareness and education, informed by praxis and reflection, must become a crucial concern in the life of African-American congregations. While most congregations claim to support several types of missional ministries, all too often, they lack intentional engagement necessary for lasting effect. Theologian Peter Paris alludes to this when he critiques the African-American Church as a moral agency in conflict and observes that, "The absence of continuous critical thought about their mission ensured the perpetuation of traditional understandings and practice, and they often failed to see that both their thought and action were shaped within the framework of that which the larger white society found acceptable."⁴ This essay assists congregations desiring to develop an appropriate framework for understanding Christian mission today in light of congregational giving.

⁴Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 79.

Mission As Congregational Lifestyle and Giving

Identifying the historical perspective that marks African-American congregations' financial support for Christian mission, five congregational models of missional understanding—assuming that missions will always be expressed through a financial commitment—are discussed.

Because descriptions are more revealing than definitions, these models of missional understanding probe the forces of African-American Christian mission. These prototypes represent not only the diversity of African-American congregations struggling to be faithful in carrying out God's mission but also highlight issues of missional understanding.

Model One: A Southern County AME Church

This church is located in a historical community with various Black denominations—particularly Baptists, Methodists, and Holiness. Several churches are inactive; buildings have deteriorated beyond repair. The neighborhood is considered a “high-risk area” because of violence and crime statistics. Most residents have lived there practically all their lives. There are several schools within walking distance, and the youth in the area are talented as evidenced that at least half the boys between the ages of four and twelve in this congregation are B+ and A students.

The congregation of this church is small—about sixty people. Its oral history is fragmented—there are no written records—the oldest members in the church (sixty years or more of service) were able to share little relating to specific dates and events in the church's life. The cornerstone was destroyed about forty years ago—the deeds are unreadable—but it is estimated to have been

built around 1920.

During the early period of the church's life (through the 1960s) there was community activity. Since then, stability has been a problem. New members or non-family members have moved elsewhere. Children and teenagers find other activities, and the congregation places little emphasis on ministries outside the church. Ministers have not lingered long either. During the last ten years, the congregation grew significantly when a pastor remained at least five years. Since then, the church has dwindled to its current membership, most of whom are family members and/or offspring of original church members. This church has four missional concerns:

1. Lack of consistent leadership: There is a direct correlation between the presence of a consistent church leader and the response of the people to ministry. A church grows when the minister develops ministries, enabling the church and community. A church declines and becomes rebellious when the leadership has no intention of long-range ministry. This is a tremendous challenge in reinvigorating the church.

2. Vision: One of the most important characteristics of effective mission is a mission statement. This sets the framework for congregational life, serving as a constant reminder of the purpose for being. A mission statement provides a clear purpose, builds congregational morale, reduces frustration, and encourages cooperation between the congregation and community organizations with similar goals.

3. Youth: This congregation is like many; it delegates most of its financial support to adults and little to nurturing young people. While social concerns and problems in the community have little negative impact, the church has missed opportunities for outreach to youth. Although the commu-

nity saw an increase in teenage drug abuse, pregnancy, school drop-outs, and violence, young people have not yet rejected the church. Their ties remain; a mission-conscious congregation could use this opportunity to re-imagine its future. The Pentecostal church has been able to experience phenomenal growth in part because it nurtures one of its greatest resources—its young people.

4. African-American Men: While much is being written about African-American men and their absence from African-American congregations, efforts are underway to stem this tide. Churches are working to attract men who believe in God and who seek relevant communities with religious understanding that allow spiritual feelings, encourage respectful behavior, and a proud manner despite racist barriers. Churches must be concerned about issues African-American men face daily—unemployment and underemployment—and address these larger concerns of economic empowerment and economic justice.

Model Two: A Suburban AME Church

This African Methodist Episcopal Church is located in an environment which, ten years ago, was described as a rural bedroom community. Today, due to population increase, it is a suburb of Atlanta. Within ten miles of the church the average family income is \$48,016, and the average home value is \$120,472. Within five miles of the church the average family income is \$24,242 and the average home value is \$35,000. Organized in 1879, this congregation is in an increasingly culturally diverse community (Asians and Hispanics), which is also religiously diverse with a growing number of non-denominational churches.

For over 100 years, this church maintained steady growth. Currently, its ministry includes an altar club for young men and women, a food cooperative, and a renovated fellowship hall. In 1984, the pastor and the congregation participated in the first citywide revival crusade, bringing together a multi-racial ecumenical community. This experience united people who rarely worshiped together. Since then, the congregation attempts to be intentionally involved in the life of its community in challenging ways. This church has a multicultural concern:

1. Multiculturalism: Multiculturalism is an issue when African-American congregations are located in communities inhabited by persons of other ethnic groups. When conflict occurs, pastors and congregations are often actively involved in addressing issues of justice and reconciliation. Since 1965, when laws restricting immigration were liberalized, intentional cross-cultural ministry has become a new concern for African-American congregations. Attempts to reach out to persons of other cultures within the immediate church community has resulted in some faithful African-American congregations attempting to learn a new language, offering educational classes in English as a second language, offering Alcoholic Anonymous classes in Spanish, providing worship space to Ethiopians and Koreans, social services for undocumented workers, and other such ministries.

As African-American congregations engage in community interactions with Christians of other ethnic groups, each learns to respect and communicate common challenges to contextualize the Christian faith. An appreciation for common human struggle enables congregations to discover that contemporary Christian journeys have more in common than first suspected. Each, however, must be willing to approach the

other without racial prejudices and learn to appreciate their particular communal strengths. These lessons can be profound. For example, according to one Asian American, "My consciousness was shaped by the Civil Rights Movement led by African Americans, who taught me to reject the false choice between being treated as a perpetual foreigner and relinquishing my own identity for an Anglo-American one. For me, African Americans permanently redefined the meaning of 'American.'"⁵

The writer's research indicates that Korean Americans, likewise, have been and continue to be used for another's agenda. An article in *Newsweek* states: "I only hope that we can turn our outrage into energy, because I still want to believe the promise is true."⁶ The ministry of Christ's reconciliation of humans to God is particularly evident in communities where ethnic differences are great. The church, as an incarnational sign of the reign of God in the ever-changing African-American community, must witness to the universality of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Model Three: Rural Holiness Congregation

In a rural community in Virginia, there are only six Black churches; three have memberships of fewer than fifteen persons. The other church memberships range from one to 200. The New Jerusalem Holiness Church was founded in 1992 by a sixty-

⁵See Marsha Snulligan Haney, "Encountering Religious Pluralism: A Challenge for Islam and African American Congregations" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1994).

⁶Elaine H. Kim, "They Armed in Self-Defense," *Newsweek*, 18 May, 1992, 12.

five-year-old-elder. The attractive church building, previously owned by Mormons, seats approximately 250 persons. The present pastor had been a life-long member of another small church in a different community. When the presiding pastor reached retirement, the elder applied for the position. However, for reasons unknown, the elder was not appointed as the pastor. Shortly after the announcement, she withdrew her membership and founded New Jerusalem. The first members included the pastor, her daughter, and a married couple. This is similar to the history of many historic holiness churches. Eventually, a few people join and others leave. The elder, as pastor, preaches and teaches the "strictness of traditional gospel teachings"—no pants, no nail polish, no make-up, no jewelry—women must cover their heads. It is the perception of many that more emphasis is placed on these externals than on salvation. Many remaining members fear that if there is no change, this congregation will eventually die.

In this church, the assistant pastor has focused her ministry on meeting the needs of people in the community, defining mission as identifying the needs of people and bringing the gospel message to address these needs. The senior pastor does not agree. She believes that ministry should focus on spirituality. The bills of the church are met through tithes and fundraisers such as bake sales. A revival is held periodically to offset the cost of operating an almost empty church. This church has two missional concerns: evangelism and women's leadership.

1. Evangelism: Most people in rural areas engage in little evangelizing precisely because they are either related as family members or know each other and assume there is no need. A few members devote themselves to calling and visiting people. However, the majority simply comes to church and behaves as if they have no testimony to share.

Often with an “absentee” pastor—one who is not of or committed to the total community with little understanding of the ethos of rural life—must be made aware of the God responsibility to move beyond the confines of family and friends. The challenge is to engage this congregation to develop a vision of Christian mission that can be pursued. The vision must reflect a strong sense of stewardship that complements fund-raising community projects with a sense of Christian responsibility and obligation.

2. Women’s Leadership: Until church leaders (both men and women) are willing to accept women as full partners in God’s mission, women called by God will find ways to serve God and God’s people outside the norm. Often denied the opportunity to serve stronger, healthier, and more stable congregations, women clergy continue to serve the church’s mission in a variety of ways. More women clergy are engaging in missions by establishing new (and often non-denominational ministries) outside traditional boundaries.

Model Four: An Urban Baptist Church

The Friendship Baptist Church is urban with an impressive missional understanding. The congregation outlines its mission involvement by focusing first on the Friendship Mission Society. This Society meets the spiritual and physical needs of the community, provides training in missions, and acts as the liaison with both the local and national missionary associations. Its goals are to discover innovative ways to engage in mission, to involve more members in actual mission activities, and to educate members about missions.

Under the direction of the national association, the Friendship

Mission Society instituted the observance of the annual National Observance of Children's Sabbath. In addition, it hosted a "Religion Day" for a local college and makes an annual contribution to the college. This church has three missional concerns:

1. The Importance of Small Groups for Missions: The congregation's mission consciousness is the result of intentional concern where all members are actively involved in the financial support of missions. The success of this Society has been its ability to mobilize and nurture church members through the promotion of mission engagement via small groups.

2. Mission As Partnership: More and more ecumenical agreements are established between congregations to accomplish more in coordination with one another than one single congregation can provide. Although they may clearly define themselves according to different polities, there is seldom disagreement on the issue of Christian responsibility to sustain deeds of compassion and service for God's mission. The most popular model of ecumenism is joint sponsorship: funding and volunteers in areas such as job readiness, employment pools, food cooperatives, and credit unions.

3. Denominations: Congregations and denominations have traditionally been viewed as necessary Christian partners, and even non-denominational churches are forming organizations to serve some of the same functions. New challenges (internal and external) require denominations restructure for congregations to accommodate changing realities related to both global and domestic mission concerns. It is important to ensure that the organizational relationship with the denomination enhances their ability to support effective missions.

Model Five: A Metropolitan Presbyterian Church

A Presbyterian Church located in northern California has participated in a mission study every ten years. While the annual process of setting goals and objectives has helped maintain a fairly adequate perception of local mission priorities and concerns, church leaders determined that a comprehensive mission study could greatly assist the congregation and its leadership in assessing the relevancy and effectiveness of current programs and goals. The mission study's purpose was (1) to assess progress in the areas of mission outreach, membership development and membership retention; (2) to determine the effectiveness of the church's response to local area social concerns; (3) to assess the church's effectiveness in evangelism efforts and mission outreach; and (4) to enhance effectiveness in the annual goal setting process and program implementation. Ultimately, the study helped the church define its goals and corresponding action plans. Special programs have been implemented in an effort to meet the short-term mission goals. Currently, nine church auxiliaries and several mission outreach programs are operating; many of the church auxiliaries have incorporated mission outreach into their on-going programs. This church has four missional priorities with corresponding goals.

1. Membership

Goal 1: Increase and maintain membership

Goal 2: Increase evangelism program

2. Stewardship

Goal 1: Improve stewardship practice of members

Goal 2: Educate members about stewardship responsibilities and advantages

3. Finance

Goal 1: Improve system of counting offering monies

Goal 2: Monitor accounting system performance

4. Mission

- Goal 1: Reorganize structure of Mission Committee along the lines of the Nguzo Saba to facilitate Sojourner Truth becoming an advocacy and leadership entity in the area.
- Goal 2: Continue to increase congregational consciousness and involvement in mission responsibilities.
- Goal 3: Conduct and coordinate at least one major peacemaking activity
- Goal 4: Increase the Mission Committee's involvement with other African-American congregations and mission bodies.

Myths Associated with Giving

Congregations must decide how to budget money to support mission identity. There must be a willingness to explore some of the myths associated with money—its strengths and weaknesses. This section identifies these myths associated with congregational giving for mission. It is an important first step toward promoting mission advocacy in African-American congregations. The biblical foundations of the Christian mission mandate, grounded in both the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures, and interpreted in light of the African-American Experience, motivates congregations in their understanding of and participation in the *Missio Dei*. However, some congregations continue to misinterpret biblical guidance about both missions and money, or unintentionally perpetuate missional practices that defeat the purpose of faithful, liberating, and effective action in the world.

Myth No. 1: Everything Is Mission

When everything is considered mission, nothing is mission. Mission is an inclusive term, which refers to the whole outreach of the church, the total expression of God's concern for the world. However, the relationship between church and world must be prioritized so that the church flourishes according to God's will. As George McCalep explains in *Faithful Over a Few Things*, "[m]ission is defined as service to God and God's creation outside the four walls and stained-glass windows of the church. Missions means giving yourself away to others. . . . A right relationship with God calls us to reach out beyond ourselves to others. Missions is doing unto the least of these my brethren. . . . After all, God so loved [not the church but] the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."⁷

The way in which congregations raise and expend funds reflects their commitment to mission. While it may be true that churches collect millions of dollars annually, not all allocate significant funds to missions. Churches face a growing dilemma that John Ronsvalle explains as "[w]ithout a compelling reason to focus outward indeed, having become convinced that focusing outward was far more complex than anyone had thought before churches turned more of their budget inward."⁸ Christian calling demands that a church be intentional about its mission work and financing.

⁷George McCalep, *Faithful Over a Few Things: Seven Critical Church Growth Principles* (Lithonia, GA: Orman Press, 1996), 16.

⁸John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Window* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 19.

Myth No. 2: Religion Is a Private Matter

An increasing emphasis on church members' growth and "mega" status has diminished the importance of public advocacy and service. The ICAM survey⁹ confirms the growing lack of interest on economic justice issues, including unemployment, underemployment, and non-employment. The theological and biblical bases for church involvement in the public arena have prompted many African-American clergypersons and lay leaders to be active leaders in the community. Congregations need to advocate effectively—religion cannot be restricted to the private arena of life.

Myth No. 3: Men Are the Pastors: Women Are the Missionaries

One of the most obvious attitudinal problems with Christian mission is that missions and missionary work is "women's work." This gender-based paradigm needs revolutionary adjustment! It needs to be eliminated from our patriarchal church where men continue to control church priorities, determining where and how mission money is spent. Replacing this prevailing model with a new paradigm of mission teams of men and women together, seeking to be faithful to the great commission of Jesus, is more consistent with the biblical model.

Studies confirm the existence of such in the early years of the Church of God in Christ. Years before this denomination officially established its Mission Department in 1926, it had a pow-

⁹See Institute of Church Administration and Management, "A Study on Financing African-American Churches National Survey on Church Giving: A Research Report" (Atlanta: The Institute, 1997).

erful missionary conviction and aggressive practices that contributed greatly to its phenomenal growth. In a 1997 paper written about the Church of God in Christ, Michael Myers noted: "Bishop Charles H. Mason had powerful women assisting him during the church's early years. Not only were they mighty in their understanding and proclamation of scripture, but they were assertive, aggressive, and diligent organizers and businesswomen as well. They would launch out into new areas and establish a church, doing all the chartering, evangelizing, administration, financial adjudicating, and speaking." [Couldn't say "preaching."] When they were ready for a pastor, they would call Bishop Mason for one, and he would send them a man."¹⁰

Myth No. 4: Poverty Is Next to Godliness

There is nothing godly about poverty, and we should not spiritualize it. Historical considerations of African-American Christianity suggest that congregations rarely embraced theological justification of poverty; they knew too well the painful weaving of racism, exploitation, and poverty. Yet, with the growing class struggle among churches of the poor, to become middle class, will new churches emerge within African-American Christianity? What is the role of the poor in setting the agenda for the non-poor church? How can we move from ministries to the poor to ministries with the poor? These questions ask that we examine our lifestyles in relation to our faith.

¹⁰Michael Myers, "Introduction to the Church Through Its Mission and Ecumenical Involvement," 1997, TMs (photocopy), p. 2, ITC, Atlanta, Georgia.

Myth No. 5: Money Is the Root of All Evil

The development of a practical theology of money is necessary to give church members an appropriate perspective. While some congregations have learned to manage money for missional purposes, the majority has not. In "The New Agenda of the Black Church: Economic Development for Black America," Lloyd Gite describes how various congregations have begun to launch economic re-development projects for their communities. Members learn what they can accomplish when monies are pooled to provide much-needed jobs, businesses, shopping centers, and senior citizen housing. Rev. Floyd Flake, whose congregation used a \$10.7 million HUD grant to build a 300-unit senior citizen housing project in New York says, "If our churches ever learn the power that they have, they can turn the urban communities of America around and control them."¹¹

Myth No. 6: The Poor Are with You Always

Matthew 25:11 is frequently misinterpreted as Jesus making a fatalistic acknowledgement of the perpetual existence of the poor. It is often used to justify ignorance and neglect of poor people within our communities. However, we are reminded of Jesus' response to the woman who poured expensive perfume on him and quotes from Deuteronomy 15. This scripture suggests to the Hebrews that if they obey their God, they will have no poor in the land. Donald Kraybill has observed that the poor, as Jesus reminds us in this story, will always be with us. They are a natu-

¹¹Lloyd Gite, "The New Agenda of the Black Church: Economic Development for Black America," *Black Enterprise*, December 1993, 54.

ral product of greed systems. That doesn't justify the perpetuation of those systems. What is justified is our ceaseless caring and giving, ensuring our determination to oppose structures that trample the poor.¹²

While there is nothing new about poverty, what is new is the distancing of the growing middle class African-American Christian community from the disadvantaged class. Congregations must involve themselves to address this issue; it is imperative to both our communities and our faithful witness.

**Myth No. 7: Missionaries Are Only White;
African Americans Have No Business As Missionaries**

The recently held Seventh General Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,¹³ afforded a unique opportunity for church leaders, professors, and seminarians to discuss issues related to missionaries and their potential today, especially African-American missionaries serving overseas. Frequently, African churches question the commitment of African-American missionaries: "You come to visit our countries, and talk about Afrocentrism, but where is real proof of your commitment?" While denominational overseas departments and recruiters, and organizations such as Lott Carey Overseas Ministry and Carver Foreign Missions provide opportunities to develop and train mis-

¹²Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing, 1978), 21.

¹³For a comprehensive analysis of the Seventh Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches in 1997, see *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, XXVI, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 1-206. The theme of the Conference—"Troubled But Not Destroyed"—presented perspectives on the history and mission of the church in African and American Christendom.

sionaries, few congregations encourage such vocational choices.

**Myth No. 8: Pastors Should Not Be Involved
in the Area of Money**

Many pastors delegate responsibility for financial decision-making to their boards and do not discuss money unless there is a problem. However, congregants expect pastors and other church leaders to provide guidance in the area of money management; an uninformed pastor is unable to deliver information required of mission and financial management.

**Myth No. 9: Clash Over Limited Christian
Resources (Global v. Local Missions)**

“How can we help Africa when we have so many problems in our own communities?” This frequently asked question suggests a competitive spirit between local mission and global support. However, there is only one mission. When mission is viewed as interrelated, much can be achieved. Local and global expressions of missions can be supported in ways that supplement each other.

Myth No. 10: Mission Is Evangelism

While evangelism is included in the mission of the church, it is a specialized aspect addressed to individuals, nominal, and non-Christians. For example, “How are we to re-present Christ to every facet of this community?” is a missional question. “How

can we reach persons with the knowledge of Christ?" is an evangelistic inquiry.

Mission As Evangelism and Finances

In discerning various aspects affecting the nurture of churchgoers toward financial contributions to missions, it becomes apparent that any discussion about Christian mission is incomplete without a concern for evangelism and implications for financing missions. This is particularly true since some people use "mission" and "evangelism" interchangeably. Some equate numerical church growth with the fruit of successful evangelism.¹⁴

The primary challenge of African-American churches historically has been to search beyond the prevailing Americanized version of Christianity for a more authentic, biblical understanding of Christian truth, community, justice, and compassion in a dehumanizing environment. As confirmed by Rita Dixon, "an essential characteristic of Black Evangelism is that it must be concerned about the progress of the whole person—the spiritual, the social, the economic, the intellectual, and the emotional development of the full person."¹⁵ The relationship between social environment and worldview is more important in the formulation of religious beliefs that one realizes. Historically, this is evidenced by the birth and nourishment of two distinct African-American Christian communities—the indigenous African-American denominations and African-American congregations within predominately white denominations—and more recently, in the

¹⁴David J. Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross Currents Today," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 98.

¹⁵Rita Dixon, "Evangelism in the African American Experience," 1992, TMs (photocopy), p. 33, Presbyterian Church (USA), Memphis, Tennessee.

small but growing population of African Americans who perceive Christianity as irrelevant to the African-American Experience.

Christian churches must address various issues as they engage in evangelism: racial/ethnic identities, perceptions of religious truth, community consciousness, and economic justice. By engaging these concerns, churches can reach persons who have known experience with Christianity.

James Stallings indicates that the first African-American evangelists saw their work as an effort to save their brothers' and sisters' souls from sin and their bodies from physical, political, and social oppression so that they might achieve full humanity.¹⁶ They built schools to educate their people. Its impact has been monumental. The Black Church has made a major contribution to American and international life through its willingness to finance its own educational institutions. People were encouraged to help themselves. It is interesting to note that the early African-American churches did not limit their evangelistic work to the shores of this continent. Early in their Christian history, they sent missionaries to Africa and countries in the Caribbean.

When considering the need for present evangelistic ministries, it is important to remember that faith always interacts with the contemporary social environment. Effective Christians are those who, motivated by Jesus' model of evangelism, represent a holistic understanding of ministry that considers people not only in terms of eternal life, but includes compassion for the present. Today's quest for meaning indicates a regard for questions of identity and knowledge, perceptions of religious truth, a purpose for life, and the desire for community unity. As congregations consider what encourages, motivates, and nurtures African-American

¹⁶James O. Stallings, *Telling the Story: Evangelism in Black Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988), 20.

church members to contribute financially to the ministry of evangelism, it is helpful to consider the following eight aspects of evangelism.¹⁷

1. If evangelism is the "core, heart, or center of mission, consists in the proclamation of salvation in Christ to non-believers, in announcing forgiveness of sins, in calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community, and to begin a life in the power of the Holy Spirit," then how is its importance lived out in the life of congregations? What percentage of our church budget reflects this priority of proclamation in both word and deed? How is this concern reflected in both budgetary and non-budgetary ministries outside the worship service? In an historical incident provided by James M. Shopshire, we are given insight into the strength of the mission motivation as it relates to the Georgia Conference (Colored) of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1925:

Mr. President and Conference: We, your Committee on Temperance, beg to make this our report: We recommend that all ministers, preachers, and members refrain from strong drink, alcoholic or any habits that point downward. Let them act as becomes the saints of God. Be sober, kind, loving and virtuous, true at home and abroad, that their Christian influence may win souls and bring them to Christ, and the church will be an edifice and God will bless our labor."¹⁸

¹⁷Bosch, "Evangelism," 98-103.

¹⁸James M. Shopshire, "Black Methodist Protestants, 1877-1939: Protest and Change Among African Americans within Predecessor Organizations of the United Methodist Church," in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 184-185.

Clearly, this gives evidence of a major concern for Christian ethics and moral actions that would result in missions, both local and overseas. More than that, however, it shows a mature awareness of the role of Christian actions, morals, and theology.

2. If "evangelism seeks to bring people into the visible community of believers," what budgetary items reflect congregational expenditures for contacts with non-Christians to introduce them to the church and the Christian life, and to an explanation of Christian beliefs until such persons are ready to decide positively and be brought into the "visible community of believers"? How are those who give to the mission of the church encouraged in this effort?

3. If "evangelism involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do," then given the unique history and present challenges facing the African-American community as it seeks to journey with God, and in light of the unforeseeable future, what is reflected in congregational giving? When the African-American community is under assault, how is the "old, old story" communicated to witness God's liberating attributes in history, and the reality of God incarnated today? Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges facing the church today, demonstrating to the new generation how the communal wisdom, ethical, and moral lessons gained from God's journey with our ancestors are meaningful.

4. If "evangelism is an invitation," how is this extended? In spite of the effectiveness of television evangelists and cyberspace churches, person-to-person relationships will always dominate as the most significant means of extending evangelism as an invitation. Congregations, as well as those who personally support evangelistic ministries with their offerings, tithes, and other donations, should be able to identify budg-

etary expenditures used to strengthen this ministry.

5. If evangelism is possible only when the community that evangelizes—the church—has a winsome lifestyle,” how is money managed to convey an authentic expression of Christian faith? To develop a welcoming and “winsome” lifestyle, congregations are recognizing the need for money management education, not only for church officers, but also for members and the community at large. By reaching out in such a manner, the Christian faith is interpreted as speaking to an important area of life that people address daily.

6. If “evangelize is to take risks,” what are the financial indicators that demonstrate how we train church members in this area? Risk-taking is required in several spheres of life if evangelism is to be biblically-based and culturally-relevant. Congregations (and individuals) must demonstrate a willingness to live out the faith they profess in gospel songs and hymns, sermons and creeds, and venture in new territories. They must also be willing to allow congregations to take risks with the gifts, offerings, and donations, using them to help improve the conditions of others.

7. If “those who respond positively to evangelism receive salvation as a present gift and with it assurance of eternal blessedness” in what ways are congregational resources identified and managed to assist new Christians to live out the Good News daily? How are other Christians encouraged to trust God and to live daily with Christ, in word and deed? How is this expressed in tangible form?

8. If “evangelism is calling people to become followers of Jesus,” how do church expenditures reflect a concern for the incarnational Jesus, his mission, and model of caring within a hurting, confused, and dying humanity in need of liberation, healing, wholeness, and genuine Good News? How is

evangelism experienced as both a call to community and a call for community?

Conclusion

As indicated in this investigation, it is important for congregations to consider the *Missio Dei* as related to personal and congregational giving, in local and world expressions of mission. The financing of Christian missions by African-American congregations has been the result of committed women and men, who, out of love for God and commitment to the church, have given their tithes, donations, and other gifts for the betterment of humankind. These sacrificial donations are used most effectively when the church understands itself as missional, and the leadership—laity, ministries, organizations, and relationships—is nurtured in such an identity.

The key characteristics of church members who actively support mission giving and congregations actively engaged in missions include a significant commitment to Jesus Christ, followed by a strong belief that one's faith should be active in the world. Church members who attend worship regularly and volunteer regularly in the community are more inclined to support outreach ministries. A sense of social and Christian obligation and a concern for those less fortunate also characterizes giving congregations. As one church member said, I was always taught to hold the ladder so someone else could climb up, and my pastor teaches the same thing. When motivational factors are considered, the desire to please God, to live the Christian lifestyle, and the desire to help people—along with a personal sense of commitment to the African-American community—are among the key considerations. Additionally, congregations support financially those mis-

sional opportunities in which they believe and those with a purpose with which they identify. When challenged to feed the hungry, visit those in prison, or to provide homes for the homeless, members desire to see the impact of their giving. Also, congregations with a historical tradition of faithful mission engagement tend to have a more relevant involvement with the world at large.

The relationship between Christian missions and issues related to the financing of that mission are of critical concern. Whether the average Black congregation will be able to effectively meet the emerging challenges of the new millennium is debatable. It has been rightly described that mission is to the church as burning is to fire.

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BISHOP OF SALISBURY

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