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THE BLACK CHURCH IN TOWN AND RURAL SETTINGS

Introduction

When we visualize our churches, we often see them as large urban structures involving large numbers of people in worship and service. In reality, half of all the congregations in the United States have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults and just over half are located in small town and rural settings. In fact, a full quarter of congregations have fewer than fifty regularly participating adults, while less than 10 percent have more than 1,000.¹ The large urban church is the exception, not the rule. The small membership church located in town and rural settings is certainly more the case than the so-called megachurch.

These and other findings were discovered in the *Faith Communities Today* study conducted in year 2000. It was the single largest survey of congregations ever conducted in the U.S. It is the most inclusive, denominationally sanctioned program of interfaith cooperation. Our ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 focused on the historically Black denominations.

Early in the year 2000, approximately 1900 pastors and senior lay leaders were interviewed by the Gallup Organization. They gathered relevant data about sermons, worship patterns, commu-

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¹Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today* (Hartford, CT: The Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2001), 8.

nity service, sources of conflict, financial health and key demographic characteristics of the pastors and their congregants. A variety of churches were randomly selected and contacted. Megachurches, urban storefronts, rural churches, and mosques were surveyed. In addition to the telephone survey collected by the Gallup Organization, ITC/FaithFactor trained thirty additional persons to gather data. They were masters and doctoral level students who conducted research in the southeastern part of the United States. Under our supervision, they examined approximately 400 rural and urban Black settings of congregational life. Hence, our project, in its endeavor to study Black religious life in the year 2000, collected approximately 2,300 surveys. We know more today about the rich and diverse manifestation of Black religiosity than we have ever known previously.

This article examines an important segment of Black religion life—the town and rural church. While most African-American churches are located in urban settings, a significant number of people continue to support the Black rural church. As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya said in their landmark study of *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, rural churches have been and will remain the historical and cultural reservoir of the “Black folk” religious experience. Many of the distinctive features of Black worship styles—preaching, shouting and falling out, spiritual and gospel music, and enthusiastic antiphonal audience responses—were developed in the womb of the rural church. Black rural churches also played important historical roles in helping black people survive the dehumanization of slavery in providing economic and educational uplift after the Civil War; and in acting as major centers for political activities such as slave rebellion, civil rights protests, and, more

recently, mobilizing the Black vote.²

This article gives a brief overview of all rural churches in the United States, followed by a more detailed examination of Black rural settings. Our specific exploration of approximately 350 African-American faith communities in the southeastern part of our country will be highlighted. The Black religious presence in the town and country setting of the U.S. is an important and significant presence.

Rural Churches in General

As indicated above, the majority (52 percent) of all churches are located in town and rural settings. Cities with 10,000 people or more maintain 25 percent of all churches, while 23 percent of all congregations are located in suburban areas. For many Americans in general, the rural church is an important part of their lives. Liberal Protestant, Moderate Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, as well as the historically Black denominations are located in rural areas.

“Other, smaller, town and rural churches are less likely to claim a sense of purpose and vitality. But even in these conditions, more than half report that they feel vital and alive, and over half report being a moral beacon for their communities.”³ Those churches that most frequently reported feelings of vitality were traditional Black congregations, where those reporting this less often were identified as Liberal Protestant groups.⁴

²C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 111.

³Dudley, *Faith Communities Today*, 20.

⁴Ibid.

Generally, churches growing in membership are located in cities and suburbs. The rural and town churches are, in some instances growing, but certainly less so. Those churches that are growing, both urban and rural, are doing so for a variety of reasons: community involvement, clear congregational focus, membership care and discipline, inspirational worship, and other things. "Contrary to some published experts, congregations with a strong commitment to social justice and with direct participation in community outreach ministries are more likely to be growing than other congregations."⁵

Rural churches as well as urban ones are involved in their communities. Cash assistance, food assistance and thrift store activities are provided by more than 60 percent of all congregations in the United States. Rural churches are likewise heavily involved. Thrift shops, tutoring programs, day care and childcare, as well as health-related activities are found in rural and town religious settings. Thus, community outreach is important in rural communities. They, like their urban counterparts, contribute to the welfare of their communities.

Finally, the majority of congregations studied during the year 2000 saw themselves as being vital and alive. However, some indicated that they had lost the energy that comes with a clear sense of vision. The age of a congregation and internal conflict seem to influence vitality. Location is another factor. In fact, "new suburban areas clearly have more resources of family life, youth, facilities and finances to support congregations."⁶ By comparison, other locations like rural and town contexts often struggle. Sixty-nine percent of churches in

⁵Ibid., 27.

⁶Ibid., 60.

newer suburban areas indicated that they had a high clarity of purpose, and, thus, greater energy of vision. A smaller majority of rural churches (53 percent) reported a similar position.

African American Congregations in Town and Rural Settings

Most Black churches are located in urban areas, as is the case for African-American people generally. But there is a strong Black religious presence in town and rural areas. Our study among all Black churches revealed that rural ministry is important. In fact, 12 percent of all Black churches are in rural areas. But among Christian Methodist Episcopal churches that percentage is much higher—28 percent. As Table A illustrates, Black religious presence varies in town and rural settings from a smaller percentage of Black United Methodist (4 percent) to a much larger one among Christian Methodist Episcopal churches.⁷

Black churches of 100 or more active adult members are typically better able to support a full-time pastor and are more likely to be located in cities and suburbs than in small towns and more rural areas. However, this varies depending on which Black denomination is being considered. As Table B indicates, 23 percent of all Black churches with 100 or more active adult members are located in rural communities. But other than Church of God in Christ (12 percent) and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches (8 percent), the other Black denominations have much higher percentages among their churches. For example, African Methodist Episcopal church-

⁷Michael I. N. Dash, Stephen C. Rasor, and Christine D. Chapman, "ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 Study of Black Churches" (Atlanta, GA: ITC, 2001), 1.

es with 100 or more active adult members comprise 47 percent of those AME congregations in rural communities. The Baptist (44 percent), Black United Methodist (33 percent), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (33 percent), and Black Presbyterian (27 percent) provide a significant and active church membership presence in town and country settings.⁸

The demographic makeup of these Black congregations varies significantly as indicated in Table C. Black Presbyterian churches in rural communities appear to have the highest percentage of college graduates (73 percent), where Church of God in Christ reported the lowest percentage (10 percent). Many of the Black denominational groups indicated a significant number of younger people, ages 18-35. African Methodist Episcopal churches in town and country settings reported that 43 percent of their members are in this younger age category. The Black United Methodist churches appear to have a significant number of members who are age sixty or above (50 percent), whereas the Church of God in Christ indicated only 10 percent. Those reporting new members in the past five years also vary from a lower percentage among Black Presbyterian (9 percent) to a much higher percentage among African Methodist Episcopal congregations (35 percent). Thus, Black religiosity varies in rural communities among recorded membership, active membership, and membership demographic characteristics.⁹

Black Rural Churches in the Southeast

In addition to the national survey of congregations where most denominations and communities were examined (and

⁸Ibid., 3.

⁹Ibid.

reported in *Faith Communities Today*), the *Project 2000* initiative studied Black urban, suburban, and rural locations. Interdenominational Theological Center students were trained to gather data on particular Black churches in the southeastern part of the United States. Three hundred and sixty-four rural churches were contacted and surveyed during the early months of 2000. The pastors or assistant pastors were interviewed.

Overall, these southern rural congregations represent a fairly diverse collection of churches. The majority tend to focus on the personal empowerment of their church members while providing levels of outreach to their respective communities. They appear to be somewhat economically stable and spiritually focused. Their worship is geared towards collective praise and teachings that assist their members in daily Christian living. They emphasize the enhancement of a deeper relationship with God. Generally speaking, they tend to give less attention to social and political issues or serving as change agents within the larger society.

During the telephone surveys or interviews, the pastors or assistant pastors were asked how they would describe their congregation in general. They were given six possibilities: one related to the future, social justice, being spiritually alive, denominational heritage, relationship with God, and the incorporation of new people. Slightly more than half of the respondents (53 percent) suggested that they believed that their church's environment reflects a common excitement about the future. As Table D illustrates, spiritual vitality (43 percent), a deepening relationship with God (43 percent), and strong denominational heritage (42 percent) are fairly common ways the pastors or assistant pastors described their rural church parishes.¹⁰

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

The assimilation of new people (28 percent) and working for social justice (23 percent) received less emphasis in their description. It should be noted that five of the six statements did not receive a 50 percent or more ("very well") response which may suggest that these respondents would prefer other types of descriptors to characterize their churches.

The pastoral leaders were asked about their sermon topics or areas of focus. Table E gives a breakdown of these. Three of the topics received great attention among the pastors or assistant pastors: God's love and care (79 percent), practical advice for daily living (64 percent) and personal spiritual growth (67 percent). Sermons which focus on social justice (26 percent), racial situations (21 percent), or liberation/womanist theology (15 percent) are offered with much less frequency.

The *Project 2000* survey of southeastern rural churches also included questions about music and musical instruments. Spirituals (87 percent) and gospel music (58 percent) were used "always or often" in their worship services more than anything else, whereas dance or drama (12 percent) and gospel rap music (7 percent) were used much less. The organ or piano (88 percent) is the musical instrument of choice in these rural congregations. Drums (37 percent), other instruments (30 percent), or other percussion instruments (28 percent) were used with less regularity.

Among the 364 rural churches studied in the *Project 2000* initiative, approximately thirty one adults and nineteen children attended Sunday school, on the average, weekly. There were several other programs offered beyond the Sunday morning experience as Table F illustrates: Bible study (89 percent), prayer groups (76 percent), youth programs (76 percent), and community services (74 percent).

While many of the churches are small in terms of active membership, they provide special and meaningful programs well beyond the usual Sunday morning activities.

These churches attempt to meet the needs of their members especially in the areas of Bible study, prayer activities, and youth related programs. But they also reach out to those beyond their doors. Table G demonstrates that many rural congregations are providing social services or community programs for others. Youth programs (73 percent), food pantry or soup kitchens (53 percent), and cash assistance to individuals or families (53 percent) are provided by the majority of these rural parishes. Other significant outreach activities include voter registration (38 percent), thrift stores (34 percent), tutoring (30%), and counseling (28 percent). The assumption that rural churches focus only on their own members and do so exclusively on Sundays is not correct. They exist for their members and for those not on their rolls. They provide ministry both within their walls and beyond.

Different community level activities seem fairly common in the rural Black churches of the South. When it comes to more activist positions as Table H identifies, the churches are less approving. Strong support for protest marches (3 percent), political involvement (2 percent), and women pastors (9 percent) is almost nonexistent. These churches reach out to others and help specific people with certain needs, but their advocacy role in society is hardly present. This is an area which appears to be somewhat off limits.

Looking more closely at the basic demographics of these churches and their background characteristics, several important elements were discovered. The majority of the pastors are male (85 percent) and at least fifty years old. Most (89 percent) are paid for their services and a majority (57 per-

cent) are also employed in a secular job. The vast majority of the rural church pastors have some formal education. Those with a Bible school degree (39 percent), seminary education (28 percent), or post-seminary degree (12 percent) are pastoring these rural settings. This is quite significant. These men and women are well educated and trained, debunking the idea that rural churches do not attract more educated clergy leadership. Hence, 79 percent of these rural congregations have a leader with at least a Bible-school level-degree or diploma or more.

The pastors in these churches have served their present church on average more than eight years. The average membership of the congregation is 160 people, with ninety-two adults and twenty-nine children participating on a regular basis. While about 43 percent of the churches have experienced an increase in membership in the last five years, almost 50 percent indicated that their membership has remained consistent.

Table I gives a picture of these 364 southeastern rural churches. Nearly half (49 percent) of their members have less than a high school education. Almost a third (29 percent) are young people while another approximate third (30 percent) are seniors. Nearly half of the church members commute about fifteen minutes to attend their church. A large percentage (41 percent) have incomes below \$20,000. Women outnumber men three to one.

The financial characteristics of these local churches give another aspect of the rural landscape. While at least 33 percent of the pastors say that their congregations face challenges, at least 55 percent reported good financial health five years earlier. At present, that percentage is 65 percent. Overall, the leaders of these churches seem fairly confident

about their members' financial support and giving. Although almost 25 percent report annual incomes of \$75,000 or more, 53 percent tend to fall below \$25,000. Interestingly, church mission spending is significantly less, and 90 percent of these rural churches allocate less than \$15,000 for mission. Tithing is important in these settings (83 percent), and approximately 41 percent of the church's members tithe.

A final question was asked during the surveying process about disagreements in the church. Table J shows the results. Most of the pastors or senior lay leaders said that their churches did not have any major disagreements during the past five years; 19 percent indicated that their churches did. As the table indicates, money or finances (41 percent) generated most conflict or disagreement, followed by decision making (29 percent), theology (12 percent), mission priorities (9 percent) and worship (2 percent). Overall, a large percentage of the rural churches had few, if any, disagreements.

In a word, these southern rural churches are excited about the future; teach and preach God's love and spiritual growth; offer Bible study and prayer groups; reach out to people in their communities in terms of food, cash and youth programs; do not support public advocacy for justice; have fairly diverse congregational members, and experience little internal conflict. They are alive and well, serving their members and those in need in their respective communities.

Implications for the Future

The *Faith Communities Today* study and *Project 2000* expand current knowledge of rural churches and their possibilities for future ministry. Rural ministry is important and these new understandings can help denominational leaders,

seminary faculty, and local pastors build on the strengths of that existing ministry.

Several things can be said about rural ministry across the United States. While most Black churches are in urban areas many are still located in rural locations, especially Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) congregations. Baptist, Black United Methodist, AME, AMEZ and Black Presbyterian have small membership churches in rural settings but active ones. Black Presbyterians have highly educated members. AME and AMEZ have attracted large percentages of young people. UMC rural churches have many older members. New members are attending AME, AMEZ and UMC rural churches.

Other things have been discovered among Black churches in the rural South.

- These churches are excited about the future.
- The congregations hear sermons emphasizing God's love and care, personal spiritual growth and practical advice for daily living.
- Southeastern churches provide ministry inside (Bible study, prayer and youth activities) and outside (youth, food and money) their doors.
- Rural churches are not politically active or open to women in ministry.
- They are diverse in terms of age, education, and income.
- Women outnumber men 3 to 1.
- The pastoral leaders appear to be well educated.
- A large percentage of rural churches have lower income members.
- Rural churches have few disagreements.

Thus, not all Black churches are the same, in rural or urban areas. Different denominations have produced different results in rural ministry settings. While United Methodists have aging congregations, at the same time they have increased their membership. New members and especially young people have been drawn to the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion rural churches.

Southern rural churches seem upbeat about their spiritual care and community outreach. While having a significant number of lower income members, they do a great deal with their resources—both for members and nonmembers. They provide support for the inward journey as well as the outward journey among rural people.

Rural churches are here to stay. All Black denominations have them in the United States. Many denominational leaders, seminary faculty, and local pastors need to consider the following questions for the future:

- Why are some rural churches growing, especially among young people?
- Why aren't more men involved in rural church settings?
- Why are most rural churches comfortable with community outreach but not political or social justice advocacy?
- Why, with overwhelming numbers of female membership, are rural churches less open to women pastors?
- Finally, what can urban churches and their leadership learn from rural settings in terms of their strengths in community building and community outreach?

Rural ministry is significant in the various rural towns and communities across this country. Exciting things are happening in these smaller but important churches. The more we all learn about their activities and unique gifts the more we can all benefit—rural, suburban, and urban ministry leadership.

TABLE A

**DISTRIBUTION OF CHURCHES
IN RURAL-URBAN LOCATIONS**

| Church | Rural Area | Suburban Area | Urban Area |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|
| Total Sample | 12% | 22% | 66% |
| CME | 28% | 23% | 49% |
| AME | 15% | 22% | 63% |
| AMEZ | 14% | 32% | 54% |
| BLACK PRESBYTERIAN | 11% | 14% | 75% |
| COGIC | 11% | 25% | 64% |
| BAPTIST | 5% | 16% | 79% |
| BLACK UMC | 4% | 21% | 75% |

TABLE B

SIZE OF CHURCH AND TYPE OF COMMUNITY

Percent of churches with 100+ active members

| Church | Rural Area | Suburban Area | Urban Area |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|
| Total Sample | 23% | 46% | 53% |
| AME | 47% | 60% | 65% |
| BAPTIST | 44% | 81% | 68% |
| BLACK UMC | 33% | 74% | 66% |
| AMEZ | 33% | 36% | 46% |
| BLACK PRESBYTERIAN | 27% | 23% | 49% |
| COGIC | 12% | 31% | 30% |
| CME | 8% | 24% | 42% |

TABLE C

**DISTRIBUTION OF MEMBER
CHARACTERISTICS IN RURAL AREAS**

Demographic profiles

| Churches | College Grads | Ages 18-35 | Age 60+ | New Members |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------|---------|----------------|
| AME | 38% | 43% | 34% | 35% |
| AMEZ | 33% | 40% | 27% | 27% |
| BAPTIST | 35% | 31% | 15% | 15% |
| BLACK PRESBYTERIAN | 73% | 27% | 36% | 9% |
| BLACK UMC | 28% | 27% | 50% | 25% |
| CME | 33% | 25% | 34% | 14% |
| COGIC | 10% | 27% | 10% | 17% |

TABLE D**PASTORAL LEADERS DESCRIBING
THEIR RURAL CHURCHES**

**Percentage saying the statement
describes their church "very well"**

| Statement | % |
|---|----------|
| Your congregation is spiritually vital and alive. | 43% |
| Your congregation is working for social justice. | 23% |
| Your congregation helps members deepen their relationship with God. | 43% |
| Your congregation gives strong expression to its denominational heritage. | 42% |
| Members are excited about the future of your congregation. | 53% |
| New people are easily assimilated into the life of your congregation. | 28% |

TABLE E

PASTORAL LEADERS' FOCUS OF SERMONS

Percentage saying that the topic is "always"
addressed in their sermons

| Program | % |
|--|----------|
| God's love and care | 79% |
| Practical advice for daily living | 64% |
| Personal spiritual growth | 67% |
| Social justice or social action | 26% |
| References to racial situations in society | 21% |
| Liberation Theology or Womanist Theology | 15% |

TABLE F

**SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION
IN THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS**

**Percentage saying their congregation participated
in programs in addition to regular Sunday school,
during the past twelve months**

| Program | % |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Bible study other than Sunday school | 89% |
| Theological or doctoral study | 35% |
| Prayer or meditation groups | 76% |
| Spiritual retreats | 35% |
| Community services | 74% |
| Parenting or marriage enrichment | 27% |
| Youth programs | 76% |
| Young adults or single programs | 43% |

TABLE G

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES OR COMMUNITY PROGRAMS IN THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS

Percentage saying their congregation participated

| Program | % |
|---|----------|
| Food pantry or soup kitchen | 53% |
| Cash assistance to families/individuals | 53% |
| Thrift store or thrift store donations | 34% |
| Elderly emergency or affordable housing | 20% |
| Counseling services or "hotlines" | 28% |
| Substance abuse programs | 16% |
| Youth programs | 73% |
| Tutoring or literacy programs | 30% |
| Voter registration or voter education | 38% |
| Organized social issue advocacy | 22% |
| Employment counseling | 15% |
| Health programs | 28% |
| Senior citizens | 26% |
| Prison or jail ministry | 27% |
| Credit unions | 2% |

TABLE H

Percentage who strongly approved of church priorities

| Practices | % |
|--|----------|
| Clergy from your church taking part in a protest march or civil rights | 3% |
| Church expressing views on day-to-day social and political issues | 2% |
| A woman as pastor of a church | 9% |

TABLE I

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
OF RURAL CONGREGATIONS**

Average percentage of regularly participating adults

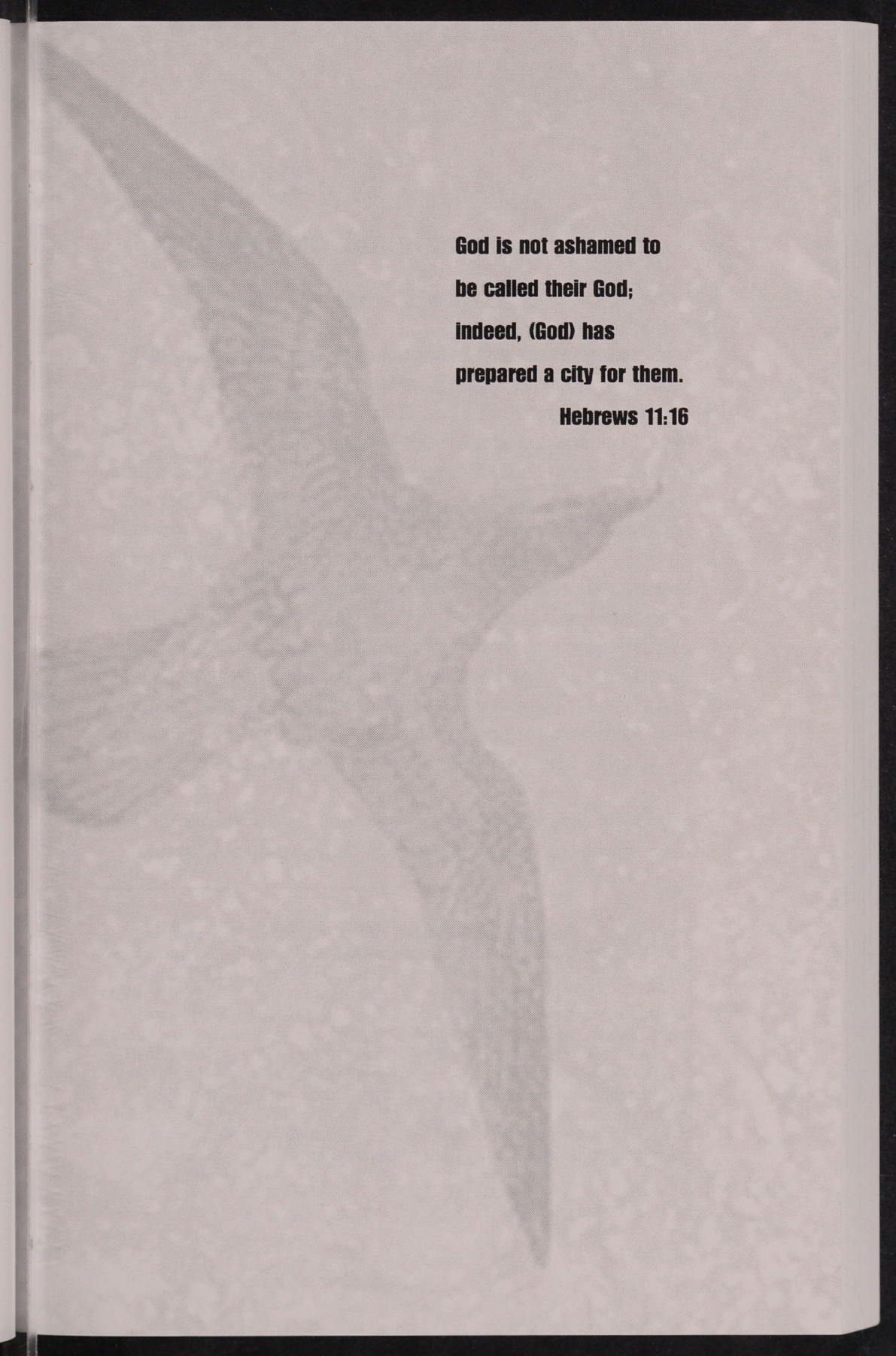
| Characteristics | Average % |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Less than high school diploma | 49% |
| College graduate | 30% |
| Ages 18 – 35 | 29% |
| Over 60 years of age | 30% |
| New to church in last 5 years | 43% |
| Commuting about 15 minutes | 48% |
| From household below \$20,000 | 41% |
| Male | 28% |
| Female | 72% |

TABLE J

DISAGREEMENTS IN THE CHURCH

In the past five years, 19 percent of the pastoral leaders interviewed reported that their congregation had experienced some major disagreements. The following table highlights the top disagreements first mentioned:

| Topic | % Mentioned |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Money/finance | 41% |
| Decision making | 29% |
| Theology | 12% |
| Program/mission priorities | 9% |
| Other | 7% |
| Worship | 2% |



**God is not ashamed to
be called their God;
indeed, (God) has
prepared a city for them.**

Hebrews 11:16

