

Michael I. N. Dash\*  
Stephen C. Rasor\*

## STOREFRONT CHURCHES IN ATLANTA

### Introduction

Religion in Atlanta is understood and experienced in a variety of ways. However, when Christian churches are considered, usually the large urban and suburban congregations take precedence. In many of the Atlanta newspapers, especially in the Saturday sections on religion, large Christian churches advertise their location, programs, and ministries. One important religious collectivity often overlooked is the urban storefront church—the topic of this study.

Storefronts do not figure prominently in the literature of studies on congregational life. But they are a significant presence in the landscape of African-American congregations. Indeed, many established congregations began as storefronts. Some of today's megachurches were spawned in rented commercial space to begin their existence and subsequently grew into established congregations housed in erected edifices.

'Store-front religion' and storefront churches have been present for some time. However, academics, public poli-

---

\*Michael I. N. Dash is associate professor and director of the Ministry and Context program, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia. He co-directs ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 and is a research fellow for ITC/FaithFactor Institute for Black Religious Life.

\*Stephen C. Rasor is professor, Sociology of Religion, and director of the Doctor of Ministry program, Interdenominational Theological Center Atlanta, Georgia. He co-directs ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 and is a research fellow for ITC/FaithFactor Institute for Black Religious Life.

*Editor's Note:* This article first appeared as "Storefront Churches in Atlanta," in *The Status of Black Atlanta 2001*, published by The Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy, Clark Atlanta University and is reprinted with permission. The work is edited to meet the style specifications of the *Journal of the ITC*.

cy leadership, and leaders of the larger or mainline denominations have often ignored them. What has often been missed is that storefront churches are vital centers of congregational life, settings that foster individual and corporate spirituality, as well as other important social and economic support systems.<sup>1</sup>

Literary writers sometimes provide significant social commentary perhaps missing in traditional social analysis. James Baldwin, in numerous essays and novels, has documented the African-American Experience. Baldwin's insights were personal and rooted in the concrete world of his existence; it was his impassioned conviction that "one writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to create out of the disorder of life that order which is art."<sup>2</sup> As we consider storefront churches, two of Baldwin's works are worthy of mention. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin introduces his readers to a family who has moved from the rural South to a Northern ghetto. The Grimes family were members of the Temple of the Fire Baptized Church where "They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy."<sup>3</sup> It was in such experiences that these migrants sought to deal with the incomplete adjustment to the mores and habits of the

---

<sup>1</sup>G. Norman Eddy, "Store-Front Religion," *Religion in Life* 28 (1958-1959): 68-85; also Clark Atlanta University, *The Status of Black Atlanta 2001*, 97.

<sup>2</sup>James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: A Mentor Book from New American Library, 1968), 319.

<sup>3</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (New York: A Laurel Book, Dell Publishing Company, 1985), 14.

urban North, as they strove to maintain ties with their Southern religious fundamentalism.

In *The Amen Corner*,<sup>4</sup> Baldwin weaves into his work rituals of the Black Church. The major character is the pastor, Margaret Alexander, who moves between church and apartment. The church is above and the apartment is below. In the stage set, these spaces are represented at stage right and stage left. In the stage directions, Baldwin writes that, "The church is on a level above the apartment and should give the impression of dominating the family's living quarters."<sup>5</sup> The action of the play moves alternately from church to apartment and back to the church. *The Amen Corner* is a tale of the experiences of these migrants from the South. All the pain and tragedy, joy and refuge, are played out in this drama of the church in the life of these urban dwellers.

Traditional social analysis of storefront churches was first conducted as early as 1937 where they were described as:

. . . hundreds of Negroes so depressed by the monotony, sordidness and dreary toil of their daily life, so worried by economic problems, and so deprived of normal forms of recreation and emotional outlet, that they are forced to seek relief from these problems in the various 'storefront' churches which flourish in the Negro communities.<sup>6</sup>

In 1959, Norman Eddy explored what he called "storefront religion." He used the term to characterize the religiosity of groups of people "found in the socially disorgan-

---

<sup>4</sup>See James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner: A Play* (London: Corgi Books 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>6</sup>B. Golden, "The Negro in Syracuse, New York," TMS, 1937, 20; quoted in Ira E. Harrison, "The Storefront Church as a Revitalization Movement," *Review of Religious Research* 7 (1996): 160, n. 4.

ized area of large urban communities and generally housed in smaller secular buildings."<sup>7</sup> Ira Harrison, in 1966, argued that northern storefront churches are representative of revitalization movements: ". . . they are deliberate, conscious, organized efforts of [southern] migrants to create a more satisfying mode of existence by refurbishing rural religious behavior to the urban environment."<sup>8</sup>

In 1995, Frances Kostarelos published an interesting and detailed case study of one particular Black storefront church on Chicago's West Side.<sup>9</sup> Kostarelos described First Corinthians Missionary Baptist as a congregation comprised of persons in predominantly Black low-income neighborhoods celebrating their lives in a significant religious community. Storefronts represent an important segment of what C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya call the "black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans,"<sup>10</sup> illustrating another significant variation within diversity of the Black Church.

Other studies have examined urban, suburban, and rural churches, demonstrating the variance in location and diversity of theological traditions. The Black urban storefront setting has drawn less attention. Its strengths, the nature of its life and identity, and contributions to community empowerment were not studied. This paper focuses on results of research that studied forty-seven storefront churches in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The data are analyzed and inter-

---

<sup>7</sup>Eddy, "Store-Front Religion," 69.

<sup>8</sup>Harrison, "Storefront Church as a Revitalization Movement," 162.

<sup>9</sup>See Frances Kostarelos, *Feeling the Spirit: Faith and Hope in an Evangelical Black Storefront Church* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995, chapter 3, "The Founding of First Corinthians Missionary Baptist Church," [19]-34.

<sup>10</sup>C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 2.

preted—implications for religious life for Black Atlanta discussed and needs for ongoing research identified. As the term is used in this study, storefront is defined as any urban building used for worship, generally having housed a commercial enterprise. In a previous comprehensive national survey conducted in the 1980s, Lincoln and Mamiya found that the majority of these storefront churches were either Baptist or Pentecostal, specifically the Church of God in Christ. Among the 1,531 urban churches studied, 7 percent or 107 were considered storefront worship settings.<sup>11</sup>

From February to May of 2000 forty-seven storefront churches in the metropolitan area of Atlanta were examined. A team of trained interviewers, primarily master- and doctoral-level students at Interdenominational Theological Center, surveyed pastors or assistant pastors. The findings and their implications comprise the body of this paper.

The research discovered that Black storefront churches in Atlanta are spiritually vibrant institutions significantly involved in their neighborhoods. These churches tend to focus on strengthening the spiritual lives of members and providing needed economic services in the community. Evidence of these patterns is demonstrated in their sermons, worship focus, and programs responsive to the needs of persons in the community. Demographically, the churches are diverse with representation from poor, less educated persons as well as those with more human capital. Pastoral leaders tended to be educated and only partially supported for their services. The churches in this Atlanta sample reported relative economic stability and minimal congregational problems.

---

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 138-139.

### **Background: The State of Research on Black Religious Life**

Lincoln and Mamiya have placed many scholars in their debt through their monumental study, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.<sup>12</sup> Until that study, now ten years old, a gap existed in literature on the Black Church in America. But as Cheryl Gilkes has pointed out, there is "Plenty Good Room" for ongoing research.<sup>13</sup> Gilkes contends that the contemporary Black Church—the "church of what's happening now" is a product of the social movement of the 1960s. Those movements have forever changed the lives of all persons in our society. Some manifestations of that change are noted in the emergence of a Black middle class "and the geographic and social location of the new middle class. . . changing gender relations evidenced by a continued dependence on women's work."<sup>14</sup> Even though there is an increase of women in the ministry, there are still denominations having difficulty in honoring the claims of women to pastoral leadership.

### **Storefronts in the Urban Landscape**

In their chapter, "In the Streets of the Black Metropolis: A Profile of Black Urban Clergy and Churches,"<sup>15</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya bring attention to the development of Black urban

---

<sup>12</sup>See Lincoln, *Black Church in the African-American Experience*.

<sup>13</sup>Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 558 (July 1998): 101-121.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>15</sup>Lincoln, *Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 115-163.

churches. Through historical analysis, they found the church had a central place in the lives of African Americans and the institutions that were created and maintained by them.

While migration to urban centers is not a new or recent phenomenon for Black people, like other peoples, Blacks have always traveled to other places in the expectation of a better life. Although the slave trade was a forced migration, the Underground Railroad led by Harriet Tubman prior to the Civil War was a journey made with a promise of freedom for those who got on board. In the period of the great migrations from 1915 through 1950, storefront churches discovered this to be "a period of phenomenal growth. There was increase not only in the membership rolls of the older, established urban churches, but also in the founding of numerous new churches, often started in rented storefronts in the poorer sections of the city."<sup>16</sup> It was, as Lincoln and Mamiya point out, a "transfer of memberships from rural to urban ones."<sup>17</sup>

Some churches, mainly those smaller in size, supported migrants and functioned as mediating institutions to help acculturate the migrants to the urban context. As a result, in the urban environment, a differentiated social class emerged in Black communities, which occurred over decades of migration until the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. African Americans became a people with a unique culture "fused from the strands of Africa, America and Europe."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 126.

### Recent Commentary on Atlanta Churches

Ndugu T'Ofori-Atta has reported extensively on Black Churches in *The State of Black Atlanta 1995*.<sup>19</sup> He sets forth a typology by which the Black Church is understood and can be examined. The typology is extremely useful, but reference to storefront churches is missing. One may assume in T'Ofori-Atta's description of the historical evolution of three major Black church traditions in the U. S. that storefronts may be classified under the "Black Independent Instituted Church" (BIIC). T'Ofori-Atta states: "The BIICs are those churches that have emerged from various African folk religious experiences, church movements, and organized associations. They generally exercise instituted methods of indigenous governance and policy."<sup>20</sup> T'Ofori-Atta notes the problems and the challenges, which create opportunities for the Black Church's response in ministry to the various needs of persons. He offers from his survey three ministry models: Social Transformation model, a Black/Mixed Church model of Social Ministries, and a Black Connectional Church model. Each is operative in the Atlanta context and at differing levels. Those levels reflect both the approach and the investment by the church in the T'Ofori-Atta typology. His proposal of the Connectional model is prompted by the observation and the challenge of "rivalry and jealousy among ministers"<sup>21</sup> based on Charles Hamilton's comment made nearly three decades ago. T'Ofori-Atta offers the

---

<sup>19</sup>Ndugu G. B. T'Ofori-Atta, "The Black Church in the City of Atlanta," in *The Status of Black Atlanta 1995*, ed. Bob Holmes (Atlanta: Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy, Clark Atlanta University, 1995), 1-32.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 15.



quote, inferring that it continues among Black clergy today and in Atlanta.<sup>22</sup>

### ITC/Project 2000

The research of storefront churches in Atlanta is part of a national study on religious life in the United States. That larger study, entitled *Faith Communities in the U. S. Today* was a national survey of forty-two religious denominations. Included were Catholics, Muslims, Bahá'í, Jewish, and Protestant congregations. Our research represents the first time that storefronts have been examined concurrently with other mainline religious bodies.

The Interdenominational Theological Center/Project 2000 was conducted in the early months of 2000. After locating and identifying approximately sixty Atlanta area storefront churches, master of divinity and doctor of ministry students were trained to interview pastors or assistant pastors of these churches. In some instances, knowledgeable or well-informed laypersons completed the survey on behalf of the pastor. Forty-seven interviews were completed after a pre-testing phase of the research process. The primary objective was to gain a better understanding of those unique aspects of urban storefront religiosity and its social outreach. Additionally, a second objective was to analyze and interpret these findings for future ministry and community involvement in the Atlanta area.

The majority of the churches studied in *Project 2000* identified themselves as being either independent or Pentecostal in terms of religious affiliation. As Table 1 illustrates, a few were

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

Baptist (15 percent), Christian Methodist Episcopal (15 percent), Church of God in Christ (4 percent), and African Methodist Episcopal (4 percent). One church (2 percent) identifies itself as being United Methodist.

**Table 1**  
**Religious Affiliation Among the**  
**Forty-Seven Storefront Churches**

<u>Identified Themselves As</u>	<u>Number (%)</u>
Independent or Pentecostal	28 (60%)
Baptist	7 (15%)
Christian Methodist Episcopal	7 (15%)
Church of God in Christ	2 (4%)
African Methodist Episcopal	2 (4%)
United Methodist	1 (2%)

An eighteen-page survey, utilizing more than forty multiple response questions, was administered through the interviews. The survey was conducted by telephone or in person. The assistant pastors of the storefront churches, approximately 83 percent, were the major source of the responses. A wide variety of topics were explored with these pastoral leaders: congregational environment, religious and social programs, social services, leadership, membership, and financial issues. When time permitted, additional information was discovered by the research team in terms of denominational affiliation, time of origin, changes in geographical location, etc. Thirty-one of the original forty-seven storefront churches revealed these historical facts.

### Congregational Environment

The respondents were asked how they would describe their congregation, choosing among six possible responses.

Generally, they did not overwhelmingly associate their congregational environment with any of the statements provided. However, at least 50 percent of the pastors or pastoral assistants associated their churches with deepening relationships with God (62 percent responded "very well") and focused on an excitement about the future (53 percent responded "very well"). Over 40 percent of the pastors believe that their church is spiritually alive and concerned about new people. Working for social justice and maintaining a denominational heritage was least identified.

Sermon topics were another category of exploration. As Table 2 illustrates, sermons focused on the spiritual and practical aspects of life in these storefront congregations. Black Liberation/Womanist Theology did not claim much of their interest.

**Table 2**  
**Percentages of Sermon**  
**Topics by Pastoral Leader**

Topic: Respondents indicating that they "always" include	
Personal spiritual growth	83%
God's love and care	72%
Practical advice for daily living	60%
Social justice	23%
References to racial situation	15%
References to Black Liberation/ Womanist Theology	9%

When pastors or pastoral assistants specifically assessed worship services, spirituals are included in worship most often (72 percent). This is followed by gospel music, dance/drama, and rap music. Organs and pianos (87 percent)

most often accompanied church expression. Drama followed. Sacred scripture (91 percent) and references to the Holy Spirit (91 percent) are considered most important in worship and teaching settings.

### **Religion and Social Programs**

Approximately twenty-three adults and nineteen children on average attend Sunday school weekly. All the pastoral leaders reported that their churches also sponsor Bible study programs. Prayer or meditation programs (85 percent) as well as youth-related activities (80 percent) are important community offerings. Young adult or singles programs are less evident in the storefront churches; however, 47 percent report having these kinds of church-sponsored programs.

The ITC/Project 2000 study determined that Atlanta storefront churches are quite involved in social service programs for the community. Table 3 illustrates the various levels of activity. Cash assistance and youth programs followed by counseling and food pantries are sponsored most often. Housing concerns for the elderly and involvement in credit unions are the least offered.

It is interesting that when the pastoral leadership of the church was asked about social and political activism, the majority of respondents (58 percent) strongly disapproved of clergy involvement in protest marches. An even greater percentage of the pastoral leaders (68 percent) disapproved of their churches expressing views on day-to-day social and political issues. The question as to whether women should be pastors of churches was rejected by (68 percent) of the respondents.

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Churches Providing or**  
**Cooperating in Social Services for Community**  
**Outreach Programs in a Twelve-month Period**

<u>Social/Community Programs</u>	<u>Storefront Churches</u>
Cash assistance	89%
Youth programs	85%
Pantry	60%
Counseling	57%
Tutoring	47%
Senior citizens	45%
Voter registration	43%
Health programs	43%
Thrift store	40%
Employment counseling	40%
Prison ministry	40%
Social advocacy	39%
Substance abuse	34%
Elderly housing	30%
Credit union	4%

### Pastoral Leadership

Over 90 percent of the pastoral leadership within these Atlanta storefront churches is male. Female leadership is approximately 10 percent. The average age of these men and women is forty-six. Although a large majority of the pastors are paid (62 percent), most also work either full-time or part-time jobs beyond the church. The vast majority of pastors have

some form of ministerial education and over 40 percent have a seminary degree or above. Most churches have few full-time or part-time staff. However, the current pastor has served the storefront congregation, on the average, eight years.

### **Lay Membership**

The laity who make up the membership of the forty-seven churches studied in this project are active in their churches. On the average, 170 persons are listed on the church rolls and 94 adults and children are active in the congregation's religious life. Hence, a majority of the members are active participants in church activities.

Approximately one-third of the adult members have less than a high school education, while one-third hold college degrees. Slightly less than one-third is between the ages of eighteen - thirty-five, while 17 percent of the membership is over the age of sixty. Approximately 34 percent of the members are new to the church and almost 40 percent commute about fifteen minutes to attend church activities. The vast majority of the laity is female (75 percent) and one-fourth of the members earn less than \$20,000 annually. Interestingly, half of the churches reported that they increased in lay membership in the last five years. Few reported a decrease.

Finally, when respondents were asked if their congregations experienced major church-wide disagreements over the past five years, more than two-thirds of those surveyed indicated that they did not. When disagreements occurred, issues related to theology, money, worship, decision-making, or missions were the reasons identified as the focus of the disagreement.

### Financial Issues

The church leaders were asked how they would describe their congregation's financial health. More than half of the respondents said that the financial health of their church could be classified as being "good." However, approximately 44 percent said their situation was "tight" and less than 3 percent responded that it was "difficult." As Table 4 indicates, 20 percent of the storefront churches have incomes under \$15,000 annually. And yet, as the Table also clarifies, incomes are widely dispersed and varied. Many of these storefront churches collect significant sums of money; 37 percent receive \$55,000 or more on an annual basis.

When asked how much money the congregation gives for mission work, including local, national and international activities, approximately 80 percent gave less than \$15,000 in the past year. Most churches teach the principle of tithing, and approximately 40 percent of the church members follow this practice.

**Table 4**  
**Annual Income of Churches**

<u>Dollars received</u>	<u>Storefront church</u>
Under \$15,000	20%
\$15,000 - \$24,999	6%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	6%
\$35,000 - \$44,999	14%
\$45,000 - \$54,999	17%
\$55,000 - \$74,999	9%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	17%
\$100,000 or over	11%

### Heritage and History

Several additional facts about the churches were discovered but only among thirty-one of the original forty-seven. Not all revealed information about the original denominational affiliation, time of origin, and changes in geographical location. But a large percentage of the storefronts did so.

Most of the churches that shared information about their history and heritage indicated that they came into existence during the last twenty years. Most have remained in their original location. A few point to their period of origin as being much earlier in time. One started in 1920, a few in the 1950s, but the vast majority originated sometime since 1980.

Most of these storefronts began their ministry in a home. Approximately one-half had no denominational affiliation. The vast majority did not come into existence because of a split from another church group. Most were not mission churches supported by or funded from within a larger denomination.

In terms of the numbers of families who originally bonded together to start these churches, there was significant variation. Many began with as few as one family. Some were started with as many as fifteen families. Some of the urban storefront churches retained their original members. Others did not. Approximately one-half has stayed active.

Finally, the experience that women pastors have had in storefront churches was explored. Only a few of the Atlanta churches had women leading their congregations, but those who did responded they had experienced gender discrimination in their ministry. They indicated that their decision to start their own church was in part a result of the discrimination encountered.



In summary, the ITC Project 2000 study of Black storefront churches found that the forty-seven Atlanta churches examined are spiritually vibrant institutions, providing members and non-members needed services. The majority of the members are active in the congregation's life. They enjoy worship that includes spirituals and gospel music. They hear sermons relating to spiritual growth, God's love and practical advice for daily living. They give of their financial and physical resources to the church and in turn the storefront congregations serve others beyond their doors. Cash assistance, youth-related programs, food pantry assistance and various forms of counseling flow from the center of these local Atlanta churches.

The majority of the pastors have some level of ministerial education while laity varies in income and education. They are themselves relatively economically stable with few congregational problems. They serve their wider communities. They are significant religious and social institutions in the heart of Atlanta.

### **Interpretation and Reflection**

Churches, like most organizations, are guided by and order their lives according to philosophy and purpose. Religious bodies understand those perspectives in terms of their theology and mission: who they believe God is for them and their membership and what they believe that God or their Deity is sending them out to be and do. Belief and behavior are measurements of religious institutions. Our study of storefront churches in Atlanta confirms that they are no different from any other organization. They are certainly aligned with other churches generally described as mainline.

The study was done within a larger national survey of religious life in the United States. The results reflect similar kinds of religious expression, spirituality, and response to human hurts and hopes. As with mainline churches, the survey revealed strengths and challenges. Level of activity, response and outreach to community, depend on available resources. Access to other resources to support their work relies on their ability to create their own networks or affiliate with existing systems.

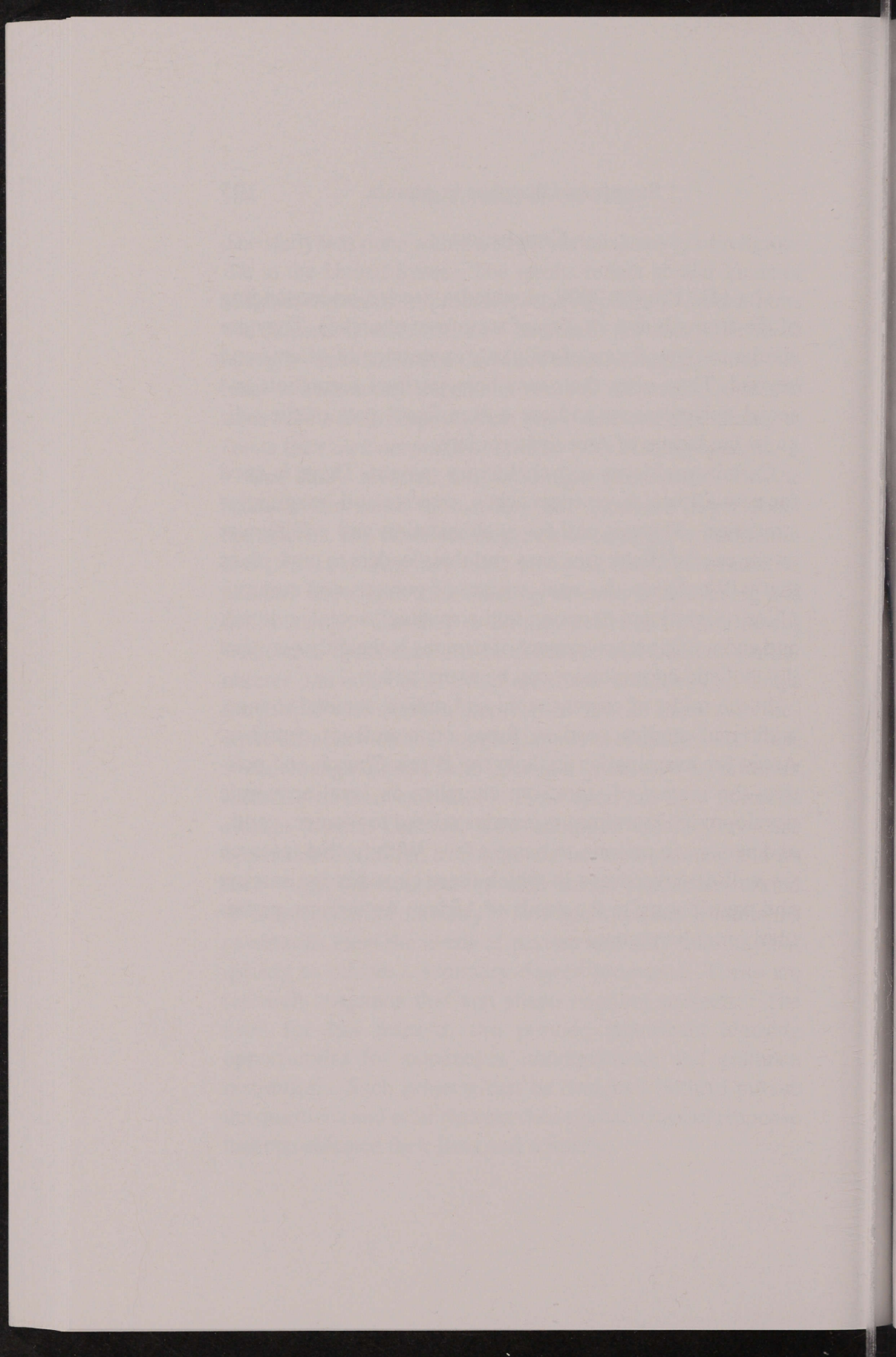
Our study revealed the challenges that remain and the research that needs to be done. But questions linger about approaches. Do storefront churches want to grow into mainline churches? Are they some emergent forms of a mainline church? How does their theology determine their being and their activity? Can they or do they desire to form alliances with other denominations or churches that possess similar natures and concerns? What are those activities that shape the people who share in them? And how do those activities exert influence on the congregation's self image? How has social change altered their lives and given new or different meaning to their existence? How open are they to social change in their context? How equipped are they to seize opportunities offered to obtain and use new resources to do their work? Do their leaders need further or a different kind of preparation for ministry? In what ways can established seminaries meet the needs of pastors and laity that may not qualify to pursue a seminary degree program? These are research questions that can shape ongoing projects. The need for this research can provide significant learning opportunities for students in undergraduate and graduate institutions. Such projects can be designed both to pursue the questions and offer the churches studied ways of response that can enhance their lives and ministry.

### Conclusion

The ITC Project 2000 provided a needed understanding of the strength and vitality of storefront churches. They are similar to other forms of religious expression in Atlanta and beyond. They offer their members spiritual formation and social enhancement and are a significant part of the religious landscape of American society.

Certain problems and challenges remain. There is need for new efforts, fresh approaches, creative and imaginative strategies. There is call for sophistication and willingness on the part of Black churches and their leaders to craft plans that will enhance the total welfare of persons and communities. Significant attention to the spiritual, social, cultural, and economic empowerment of persons is the only way that this holistic commitment can be expressed.

In the midst of current rapid and radical societal change, additional studies need to focus on storefront churches. Areas for examination include the Black Church and politics; the impact of storefront churches on local economic development; storefront ministries related to women, youth, and persons in prisons, to name a few. With further research we will discover ways in which these churches are serving and contributing to the needs of African Americans, particularly in urban areas.



**If one member (of the congregation)  
suffers all suffer together with it, if  
one member is honored, all rejoice  
together with it.**

**1 Cor. 12:26**

