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**GET ON BOARD, LITTLE CHILDREN,
THERE'S ROOM FOR MANY MORE:
THE BLACK MEGACHURCH PHENOMENON**

Introduction

Stroll into any Black megachurch late on a Sunday morning and you may not get a seat. If you do, it may be after being shuffled into one of many overflow rooms equipped with a large closed-circuit television screen, ushers, and one of many assistant ministers. This is in spite of the extremely large structures capable of seating from fifteen hundred to ten thousand people. One such church, Faithful Central Bible Church, a Black megachurch in California, recently purchased the L.A. Forum, the former Los Angeles Lakers stadium, which seats seventeen thousand people. Faithful Central, and the other sixty-five Black megachurches identified in this study have increasingly gained attention in public life as their massive structures dot the landscapes of both inner city and suburban areas across the United States with sizable Black populations.¹ The structures range from gold-

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The data for this essay were gathered through a variety of methodological approaches: interviews, participant observation, content analysis, and survey data. The quantitative data were gathered from two different surveys. Survey 1 was conducted specifically for the writer's dissertation. In this survey, data concerning the founding date, the average number of weekly attendants, and the community development activity were gathered. Survey 2 was conducted in conjunction with FaithFactor Project 2000 (a national study of Black Churches) based at Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, which collected data on various aspects of Black megachurches, including questions designed to measure their theological orientation. Data gathered in conjunction with the FaithFactor Project are designated *Project 2000*.

domed buildings, as in the case of World Changers Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia, to former large department stores, e.g., First Baptist Church of Glenarden in Landover, Maryland, to groups of buildings that resemble small college campuses (like Jericho City of Praise in Landover, Maryland) to extremely large "traditional" churches (like Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City).

The sheer size of the congregations, reflected in the many shopping mall-like church parking lots with parking attendants to move thousands of cars, commands attention. Many of these churches utilize sophisticated media outlets such as closed-circuit television and PowerPoint presentations as audiovisual aids during church services. Furthermore, several have televised services shown in local markets; and nationwide in syndication, especially on Black Entertainment Television and Trinity Broadcasting Network. Through television, in some cases over the radio airwaves, many of these churches are able to reach an even larger audience than the several thousands on their church pews on Sunday mornings.

The vast majority of Black megachurches have web sites on the World Wide Web containing information about their ministries, their history, and their community development activities. Some of these web sites allow a net surfer to view video clips of church services and listen to tracks from the latest compact disc released by one of the church choirs. Others allow one to purchase audiocassette tapes, videotapes, and books (one even sells a diet) online. Some even allow you to accept Jesus as your personal savior online by reading a confessional prayer aloud. This is definitely a new way of doing church!

This essay, first, generally describes the Black megachurch phenomenon, then explores two of the most dominant ten-

dencies among these churches: a neo-Pentecostal theological orientation and disproportionate engagement in community development activities; specifically, housing, economic development, social service delivery, and community organizing. Finally, a typology of Black megachurches is presented. Although Black megachurches do exhibit common tendencies, they vary; and the typology illustrates this variance.

Defining African-American Megachurches

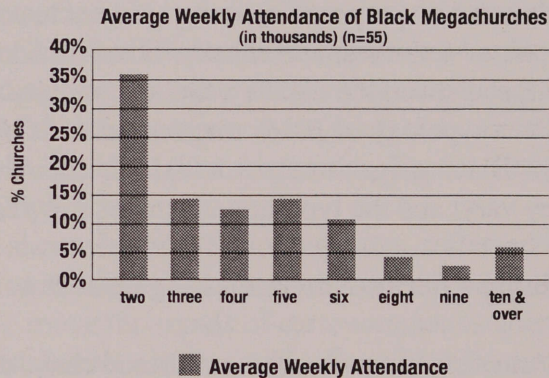
African-American megachurches are Black churches with at least 2000 people attending the weekly Sunday services. They are in operation seven days a week and have multiple ministries. Whether renting, buying, or owned, Black megachurches have control over the church edifice all week.

Using 2000 average weekly attendants (AWA) as the criteria,² the writer has verified sixty-six Black megachurches, which range in attendance size from 2000 to 20,000. The mean AWA is 4,832 and the mode AWA is 2000. Over 50 percent average fewer than 4,000 people per week and only 6 percent average over 10,000 people per week.

The majority of Black megachurches are located in sunbelt cities such as Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles and Atlanta. They are also located in metropolitan areas with large numbers of Black suburbanites, though they are not necessarily located in the suburbs. In fact, most Black megachurches, unlike most

²The criteria are borrowed from the work of Scott Thumma, who uses 2000 average weekly attendance as the criteria for megachurches. He reasons that average weekly attendance is more of a standardized measure than membership numbers, which are often the criteria for megachurch status. See Scott Thumma, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1996).

Figure 1



Note: The data do not reflect those churches averaging weekly attendance of 7000.

white megachurches, are located in urban areas rather than suburban ones.

Although the denominational affiliation of Black megachurches generally copies the national denominational breakdown of Black churches, there are a few notable exceptions. Like Black churches in general, most Black megachurches are Baptist and the majority of these are Baptist, belonging to one of the historically Black denominations or conventions. Black megachurches, however, are much more likely to be nondenominational (though not to the extent of megachurches in general which are at least 50 percent nondenominational) and are a part of the Sanctified (Holiness, Pentecostal, or Apostolic) tradition than Black churches in general. Eight percent of Black megachurches are Sanctified,³ and 29 percent are nondenominational.

³Only 2 percent of Black churches are a part of the Sanctified church according to Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 371.

Table 1
Denominational Affiliation of Black Megachurches

<u>Denomination</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Baptist	46%
Nondenominational	29%
Black Churches in White Denominations (United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ)	9%
African Methodist Episcopal (AME)	8%
Sanctified Church (COGIC, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Bible Way Church, Apostolic)	8%
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N=66	

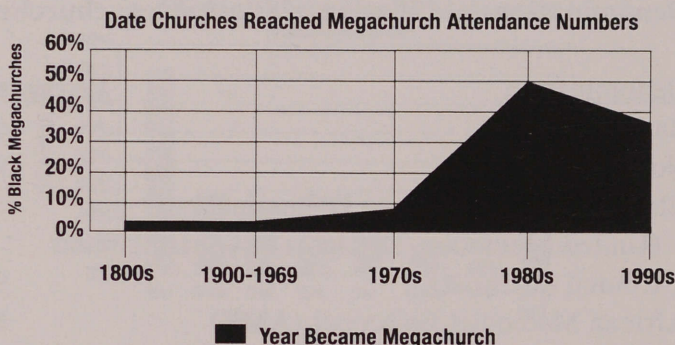
Founding and Expansion of African-American Megachurches

The occurrence of extremely large Black churches is not an entirely new phenomenon. In fact, there were large Black churches before the turn of the twentieth century. In "Plenty Good Room," Cheryl Gilkes lists several churches that were "megachurches" in the early nineteenth century.⁴ Likewise, in an examination of Black churches in New York City, Clarence Taylor discusses several churches that had over one thousand members as early as the 1920s.⁵ Although we do not know the average weekly attendance, it was probably a sizable number, especially churches identified as having

⁴See Cheryl T. Gilkes, "Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 (July 1998): 101-121.

⁵Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 236.

Figure 2



extremely large memberships like Antioch Baptist Church, which reported ten thousand members in the early 1950s.⁶

Although there is evidence of these early large Black churches, the Black “megachurch phenomenon” refers to the unprecedented number of churches having these megacongregations. Although the founding dates of Black megachurches vary (many were founded as early as the nineteenth century), their expansion generally occurred after the 1980s. Figure 2 illustrates this explosion.

The “megachurch phenomenon” also refers to the quickness with which megachurches reached “megachurch status.” For example, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, grew from 300 members in 1987 to 23,000 members in 1999.⁷ Similarly, Windsor Village United Methodist Church went from 25 members in 1982 to 10,200 members in 1998.⁸ In fifteen years, St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York, grew from 84 to 5000 members in 1993.⁹ This

⁶Ibid, 238.

⁷See “Our History: New Birth Missionary Baptist Church.” (<http://www.newbirth.org/>).

⁸See *The Saquaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saquaro/contact.html>).

⁹Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 2.

growth is often accented by establishing multiple locations or moving to a larger facility either attached to the old one or in a different location. Even with the movement to larger facilities or the establishment of multiple locations, most Black megachurches have multiple Sunday services to accommodate continually growing numbers and the schedules of parishioners. Furthermore, the churches in this study show no decline in growth. In fact, 60 percent of them report significant growth in the last five years.¹⁰

In such a large church, anonymity may be a factor that either discourages people from attending or draws people to attend. On the one hand, many may feel lost in such a large church and may have a hard time connecting to other members and to the church itself. On the other hand, others may want to attend services without having to become deeply involved in church life and may attend a megachurch specifically for this reason. Although almost none of the megachurch ministers questioned viewed anonymity as a serious problem in their churches, Black megachurches have various programs that indicate an awareness of and an attempt to address problems (like anonymity).¹¹ Many Black megachurches have created cell groups or small sub-groups of the membership to help integrate people.¹²

Having described general characteristics of Black megachurches, the writer discusses two developments in these churches: a neo-Pentecostal movement and faith-based community development.

The Neo-Pentecostal Movement in Black Megachurches

“We are a Christian church.
Baptist by denomination,

¹⁰See *Project 2000* for this data.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

Pentecostal by experience,
Holiness by choice.”

Cathedral Second Baptist Church¹³

“We are a spirit-filled church full of power, exercising the gifts of the Spirit as recorded in Acts 1:8 and I Corinthians 12:4-7.”

Greater St. Stephen’s Full Gospel Baptist Church.¹⁴

As evidenced by their mission and vision statements, Greater St. Stephen’s in New Orleans, Louisiana and Second Baptist Church, in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, are two of many Black megachurches part of a neo-Pentecostal movement within many Black megachurches. A neo-Pentecostal, charismatic worship style includes enthusiastic worship while embracing the “spiritual gifts” of the Sanctified church. Though they are Baptist churches, it is clear that both Greater St. Stephen’s and Second Baptist embrace Pentecostalism. Second Baptist choose “Pentecostalism” and “Holiness.” Greater St. Stephen’s references the Bible of the Pentecost to give credence for their chosen belief system and worship style.

Scott Thumma, in “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena,” notes that most of these churches, even if they are affiliated with a denomination, are in fact functionally nondenominational. Generally, they are theologically conservative, Pentecostal, or Fundamentalist.¹⁵

¹³This is part of Cathedral Second Baptist Church’s mission and is accessible on the church’s web page, www.thecathedral.org/

¹⁴This is a part of the vision of Greater St. Stephen’s Baptist Church and is accessible on the church’s web page, www.greaterststephen.org.

¹⁵Scott Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context,” [article online] (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 1996, accessed 3 March 2002); available from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2html; Internet.

Lincoln and Mamiya observe a neo-Pentecostal movement in AME megachurches. While they do not discuss "megachurches" specifically by name, they do describe a church-growth movement observed in the AME denomination, which they attribute to a broader "neo-Pentecostal" movement. They identify several churches that have developed into megachurches, notably Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland; Allen AME Church in Jamaica, Queens, New York City; and Ebenezer AME Church in Ft. Washington, Maryland. They trace this movement to Pastor John Bryant, who while the pastor of Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, led this congregation to a more "charismatic," neo-Pentecostal, and Afrocentric worship style. Not only did this pastor lead Bethel to this worship style, he had several protégés; namely, Grainger Browning, pastor of Ebenezer AME Church; and Floyd Flake, pastor of Allen AME Church, who went on to implement a charismatic worship style in the churches they would eventually pastor. Charismatic movements, especially in white churches are generally accompanied by conservative politics; however, these charismatic AME churches are characterized by their progressive political involvement in keeping with an AME tradition (many were active in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement).¹⁶ According to Lincoln and Mamiya, a neo-Pentecostal/church-growth movement is likely occurring in other denominations and, in fact, examining Black megachurches provides evidence of this movement in other denominations.¹⁷

Just as the above mission statements illustrate, many Black megachurches evidence a neo-Pentecostal theologi-

¹⁶C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 385-388.

¹⁷Ibid., 388.

cal orientation. Greater St. Stephen's Full Gospel Baptist Church, (partial mission statement above) is one of the best examples of neo-Pentecostalism in mainline denominations. Greater St. Stephen's is the mother church of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, which was begun by the pastor of Greater St. Stephen's, Bishop Paul Morton.

Morton's rationale for beginning the full gospel fellowship clearly shows a Pentecostal influence. When asked why he started the full gospel fellowship, Bishop Morton stated:

God led me to begin the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, which came out of Greater Saint Stephen's. We were a traditional Baptist church. We believed the basics of the Bible that you needed to be saved. We believed in the death, burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But growing up in the Pentecostal church, I knew that God had another level for us as it related to the fullness of the Holy Spirit, as it related to casting out demons, laying hands on the sick, speaking in a heavenly language. So what God did, He said 'to transition the traditional Baptist church I had into the fullness of the Holy Spirit.' Whoever wanted to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, with the manifestations of the Heavenly language, with the taking of authority over the Devil, could go to that next level. And God began to bless Greater Saint Stephen's in such a mighty way. I was so happy. All of a sudden, I had bridged the gap between Pentecostals and Baptists.¹⁸

¹⁸This quote is from an interview with Bishop Paul S. Morton by Christopher Heron, vice president, Corporate Communications, [interview online] (Montreal, Quebec: GOSPEL City.com, 23 October 2000, accessed 16 March 2002); available from <http://www.gospelcity.com/inter/interviews-oct-23-2000-b-morton3.html#top>.

Greater St. Stephen's is one of three Black megachurches in the country that is a part of the Full Gospel Movement.

Perhaps the most evident illustration of a Neo-Pentecostal/church growth movement is the development of nondenominational Black megachurches. In fact, one of the most interesting findings of this research is the rather large percentage of Black megachurches that are nondenominational. Some scholars suggest that the significance of denominationalism is declining, and Black megachurches seem to be in the forefront of moving away from denominationalism. A few of the Black megachurches in this study, e.g., From the Heart Ministries in Temple Hills, MD, were once affiliated with denominations. These churches broke away and became independent precisely because they wanted to express more Pentecostal fervor in their worship style and be able to embrace the "gifts of the gospel."

A close look at the beliefs and doctrine of the nondenominational Black megachurches indicates that they a part of an independent charismatic movement that occurred in the 1970s. This movement is the contemporary counterpart of the Pentecostal movement that began with the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. Black denominations that originally developed from the Azusa Street Revival such as the Church of God in Christ, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World and the Bible Way Church of our Lord Jesus Christ (which all have megachurches) are collectively referred to as the "Sanctified Church."¹⁹ Whereas these nondenominational churches are not a part of the Sanctified Church, many of their doctrinal tenets are the same.

¹⁹Cheryl Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-5.

An example of one such church is Crenshaw Christian Center, in Los Angeles, pastored by Fred Price. In Price's biography posted on the Crenshaw Christian Center web site, the author explains what led Price to accept a Pentecostal theological orientation.

While Dr. Price was pastoring for the Christian and Missionary Alliance at West Washington Community Church, he read Kathryn Kuhlman's book, *God Can Do It Again*. 'It stirred my soul,' he says. 'This was the missing dimension—the demonstration of the power of the Spirit of God,' or what the Bible terms 'the gifts of the Spirit.'

On February 28, 1970, he received the gift of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of 'speaking with other tongues'—also known as 'glossolalia.' That is the event that Dr. Price considers the jumping-off point in his ministry.²⁰

Further examination of nondenominational Black megachurches demonstrates that, in addition to a distinctive theological orientation, they are located and have experienced growth and expansion slightly different from Black megachurches affiliated with denominations. For example, they were all founded after 1958, and the majority since the 1980s. Nondenominational Black megachurches are likely to be located in the suburbs (71 percent). Of all the Black megachurches in the inner-city (includes most Black megachurches), only 11 percent are nondenominational.²¹

²⁰This autobiographical sketch is accessible on the church's web site, www.faithdome.org.

²¹See Thumma, "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena," [article online]. It seems that the characteristics that Thumma describes of all megachurches are truer of the Black nondenominational megachurch, than the Black megachurch in general. Their location in suburban areas, their conservative theological orientation, and their being founded since the 1950s all attest to this fact.

Community Development Activity in Black Megachurches

First AME Church exists to embody Christ both *within the walls* and *beyond the walls* by equipping all people regardless of race or origin—spiritually, economically, politically, and morally—making the Word become flesh through tools in education, health, housing, feeding, job procurement, business and incubator loans, venture capital, transportation, adoptions, mentoring, and other ministries of outreach.²²

Thus reads the mission of First AME Church in Los Angeles, California. Clearly, this statement goes far beyond what is traditionally considered “the sacred” and perhaps even beyond the role of the church. This declaration speaks about community development and revitalization as the way to make “the Word become flesh.” Community development is deeply embedded in the theology of the church.

Accordingly, FAME Church has an extensive list of community development activities, including a business resource center, an equity fund to invest in small minority owned businesses, and an immediate needs transportation program that provides subsidized transportation to those unable to meet this need (a big problem in the sprawling Los Angeles area).

FAME Church is one of the 66 percent of Black megachurches that has established a community development corporation (CDC), a separate 501c3 from which to do this community development activity. Black megachurch-based CDCs have a varied project emphasis. In many instances, there is involvement in developing housing (including single-family housing), facilities with two to

²²This is the mission statement of First AME Church in Los Angeles, California and is accessible from the church’s web page, www.famechurch.org.

three units, large apartment complexes, and also transitional or emergency housing such as homeless shelters, drug abuse centers, and women's shelters. Megachurch-based CDCs also engage in social service provision, health clinics, political organizing, business support, job training, and commercial development. There is also a commitment to commercial development and political organizing and advocacy.

FAME's CDC, called FAME Assistance Corporation, has a business incubator, job placement, entrepreneurial training, and a free legal clinic. Many of the megachurch-based CDCs take a holistic approach with a varied program emphasis. For example, the CDC connected with St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston is focused on homeless people. They provide daily meal service, shower and laundry facilities, a health clinic staffed by volunteer physicians and nurses, HIV testing and counseling, job training and placement, GED preparation and reading, tutoring, drug treatment, clothing and personal care items, and a school for their children.

Within as well as outside of CDCs, many Black megachurches are participating in community development through building/housing, commercial development, providing social services, and engaging in political advocacy and organizing to varying degrees. By nature of their membership size, and subsequent concentration of resources, e.g., money, volunteers, and space, megachurches seemingly exhibit the potential to participate in community development activity even more so than an average-sized church. An overview of several activities is presented.

Economic Development

Black churches engage in a range of activities aimed at improving the economic viability of Black communities. These include commercial enterprises such as worker-owned firms, community financial institutions, and church business endeavors; public-private collaborations through community development corporations; and work force mobilization through job training and referral.²³

Community financial institutions, including community development banks, credit unions, and revolving loan funds, are also important vehicles for economic development used by Black megachurches. In fact, 28 percent of Black megachurches report that they have credit unions. Organized for the benefit of the members and not to turn a profit, they potentially provide church constituents with access to capital for personal lending and consumer credit may also spur economic development and revitalization of communities. The National Credit Union Association estimates 12,000 credit unions in the United States.²⁴ The percentage of megachurch-based credit unions, therefore, is considerably higher than Black church-based credit unions in general.

Commercial development, which is the most expensive

²³Several authors discuss the community development activities of Black churches. See June Manning Thomas and Reynard N. Blake Jr., "Faith-Based Community Development and African-American Neighborhoods," in *Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods: Studies in Government and Public Policy*, ed. W. Dennis Keating (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996); also C. Avis Vidal, *Rebuilding Communities: A National Study of Urban Community Development Corporations* (New York: New School for Social Research, 1992); and Laura Reese and Gary Shields, *Faith-Based Development: Economic Development Activities of Urban Religious Institutions* (Boston: American Political Science Association, 1998).

²⁴This statistic is accessible from their web site, www.NCUA.org.

form of economic growth, is the least common form of community development advancement among Black megachurches. There are, however, noteworthy examples of large-scale commercial development projects. For example, Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston developed a center with several offices, a bank, an elementary school, a cafeteria, a pharmacy, a health clinic, several government and church social-service agencies, and a large reception hall. Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit constructed a multimillion-dollar housing project, a commercial center that includes a large auto-care facility, and a shopping center with a supermarket, drug store, and restaurants.

Examples of housing development are perhaps the most impressive of the community improvement activities in which Black megachurches participate. For example, the CDC affiliated with Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City manages, sponsors, or has developed at least 300 units of housing, including housing for senior citizens and the homeless. Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston has built housing or a hospice for people living with AIDS. Most of the housing projects, however, are much more modest.

Black megachurch-based housing includes transitional housing such as an AIDS hospice, homeless shelter and women's shelter; affordable housing; and housing for the elderly. A high proportion, 60 percent have housing. Forty-three percent have affordable housing and even more plan to pursue housing in the future. Most of this housing is accomplished through community development corporations.

Table 2
Black Megachurch Economic Development Activity

<u>Economic Development Activity</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>
Business activity (such as child-care centers, church book stores, restaurants, etc.)	95	59
Job referral/training	61	59
Affordable housing	43	59
Credit union	28	61
Community Development Corporation	60	65

Social Service Provision

Most Black megachurches also participate in direct social-service provision. In fact, all of the churches interviewed perform health care activities such as inoculations, health screenings, or health information seminars. There are benevolence programs that provide emergency funds for people needing assistance with rent or utility payments or distribute goods and services such as food and clothing.

While direct social service provision, such as food distribution, has sometimes been criticized for not providing long-term solutions to poverty and unemployment, several Black megachurches have promoted more self-sustaining approaches to community food needs such as food co-ops or food shares programs. With food shares programs, for example, people pool their money, buy food at low-cost bulk prices, and then dispense it according to member shares. In some instances, the shares of needy families may be paid or sponsored by other members. The goal of these collective buying programs is both to respond to immediate needs and to contribute to long-term development by reducing the cost of living for participating families.

Table 3
Black Megachurches Social Service Activity

<u>Social Service Activity</u>	<u>Percentage of Churches Participating</u>
Food bank	91
Clothing bank	78
Health projects	100
<hr/>	
N=59	

Community Organizing and Advocacy

Community advocacy and organizing emphasize the goals of community control, community decision-making and agenda setting and community empowerment. This component of community development goes beyond the "improvement" and includes the process. These activities seek to foster community solidarity. They include programs specifically designed to encourage citizen participation and consciousness raising. They may be voter drives, citizen education, political campaigning, rallying, cultural activities, and protest activities.

An interesting finding in this regard is the number of churches with ministries dedicated to political or social affairs. Most of these serve as social and political awareness groups and facilitate use of the church facility as a site for public discourse. For example, some Black megachurches hold candidate forums during local elections, which allows candidates access to community residents and more importantly, provides community residents access to perspective elected officials. Others hold information forums on community issues such as public schools, hospitals, and environmental hazards.

Table 4
Black Megachurch Community
Advocacy and Organizing Activity

<u>Community Advocacy and Organizing</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>
Organized social issue advocacy (Project 2000)	67.7	31
Voter registration and education (Project 2000)	77.4	31
Social/political concerns ministry	44	39

The amount of community development activity in which Black megachurches participate is encouraging. Their impact on individuals and communities through social service provision and, to a lesser extent, economic development activity, has improved the quality of life for many people. Nevertheless, successful church endeavors are by no means a substitute for government attentiveness to Black community development concerns. The intensity of social and economic challenges confronting Black America suggests that a combined effort between government and community institutions remains the best approach.

A Typology of Black Megachurches

As we have seen, Black megachurches vary considerably, but they do have common characteristics. Scott Thumma argues that all megachurches, through various means, express a common message: They are better than the average church and practice a more authentic form of Christianity. He states, "If there is a common message shared by all megachurches, it is that they want to portray what they do

as more vital than other congregations, somehow better than 'ordinary' Christianity. Megachurch pastors can often be heard commenting that they are 'not just playing church.'²⁵ One Black megachurch puts this aptly in the way they refer to themselves as, "Church Unusual."²⁶

Black megachurches fall along three continuums. These are (1) a nontraditional worship and architectural style and a conventional worship and architectural style; (2) an Afrocentric orientation but resisting the label, "Black church"; and (3) a tendency to focus "outwardly" viewing themselves as having a responsibility to revitalize the surrounding community and to focus "inwardly" with the personal salvation and economic well being of the church members the top priority.

To create a typology of Black megachurches using the categories of nontraditional and conventional it is instructive to look at Scott Thumma's characterization of megachurches from which the "nontraditional" and "conventional" categories are taken. Thumma characterizes megachurches as differentiated by their architectural design and worship style: conventional, contemporary or nontraditional and a mixture of the two. Black megachurches are represented in all of these categories.²⁷

The "contemporary" or "nontraditional" megachurch is characterized by unconventional worship buildings such as former K-Mart department stores located in strip malls that

²⁵Thumma, "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena," [article online], [4].

²⁶This is the slogan used by St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York, created by its pastor, Johnny Ray Youngblood, who is referring to the practice of nontraditional worship practices such as modern dance, the high involvement of men in the laity of the church and dominance in the leadership of the church. Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 6.

²⁷Thumma, "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena," [article online], [6-9].

dot the landscape of suburban America. Domed structures such as the Crenshaw Christian Center called the "Faith Dome" in Los Angeles and World Changers in Atlanta are typical of this contemporary and architectural style. In these nontraditional megachurches, instead of pews, often there is individual theater seating and a removable glass pulpit or podium. These churches often resemble lecture halls. Often characterized as "seeker churches," they sometimes focus on the "unchurched"—those who have never attended church regularly or who are turned off by the traditional worship service. One example of such a church is Abundant Life Cathedral in Houston, Texas, which is housed in a building that most people would not recognize as a church if they could not read the sign. It resembles a warehouse and is stark white in an area surrounded on three sides by office buildings and a suburban housing development across the street. The inside is less traditional than the outside. Upon entering, there is an information booth in the center and a room on the side for families with small children to view the church service in the main sanctuary. Tables are set up in the lobby area where one can purchase a book written by the pastor or one of the church's latest CDs. The sanctuary resembles a theater more than a traditional sanctuary. Instead of a large formidable pulpit and chairs for ministers, there is a glass, removable podium. Upon removal, the pulpit area is transformed into a stage for liturgical dance and other dramatic performances; and there is also a retractable large television screen. This is all in front of a background of heavenly clouds. The one traditional symbol of church is the wooden pews. However, they do not contain either hymnals or Bibles.

On the other end of the spectrum, Thumma describes the

conventional megachurch.²⁸ Churches like Abyssinian, and Shiloh Baptist, mentioned earlier, fall into this category. These churches are older, belong to one of the historically Black denominations, and are located in urban areas. They do not use many of the technological conventions such as the large closed circuit screen, removable podiums, and dramatic lighting. These churches worship in a traditional fashion and use traditional Christian symbols as accouterments for their worship and décor. They are simply extremely large and prominent traditional churches. Probably, many more Black megachurches than megachurches in general lean toward the traditional end of the traditional/contemporary spectrum.

Most Black megachurches fall along the continuum between conventional and contemporary. Thumma describes this third style as a mix between the two previously described styles.²⁹ This mixed style design may include traditional church symbols such as a church steeple and wooden pews, while incorporating contemporary megachurch technology in their worship services such as large screen closed-circuit television.

For example, the sanctuary of New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, is in a domed-shaped building, and the church service is accented with a large screen. However, on its web site is a listing of the doctrinal tenets of the Baptist faith. They observe many traditional beliefs; and in the sanctuary there are stained glass windows; and the deacons are seated up front, facing each other (a traditional Baptist seating arrangement). First Baptist Church of Glenarden is another example of a mixture between contemporary and conventional. This church has several characteristics of a con-

²⁸Ibid., [4-7].

²⁹Ibid., [6].

temporary Black megachurch—individual seating instead of pews and large closed-circuit screens during the worship service. There are no hymnbooks; the scriptural readings and words to the hymns are projected on the screen. However, this church is Baptist and observes many doctrinal tenets of the Baptist denomination.

In their work on African-American churches, Lincoln and Mamiya discovered that Black theology, although thriving in seminary had not significantly reached Black churches.³⁰ In many Black megachurches, however, Black theology is reflected in worship styles, symbols and décor, and traditions and rituals. Note that there are several Black megachurches that not only do not practice Black theology but even resist the label “Black Church.” This dichotomy, represents the two ends of the second Black megachurch continuum.

Perhaps one of the best examples of a church that practices Afrocentric Christianity is Union Temple Baptist Church in Washington, DC. According to Willie Wilson, pastor, Union Temple’s activism in the community emanates from a holistic view of Christianity that ultimately stems from an African-centered worldview. This church has activities, rituals, and teachings that exemplify this Afrocentric theological orientation. They have Bible classes on the African presence in the Bible as well as the “Dark Side of Christianity” (a critical look at Christianity when used for oppression and persecution). They express pan-Africanism through their relationship with Black Muslims, maintaining a mural behind the pulpit that portrays a Jesus and other Black notable freedom fighters at the Last Supper including, Malcolm X, Martin

³⁰Lincoln, *Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 164-195.

Luther King, Elijah Muhammad, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. DuBois, and others.

Other churches also express aspects of Black theology. For example, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois, has a series of Bible study classes called the Institute for African Biblical Studies. They have developed a set of church priorities called the Black Value System and coined the slogan, "Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian." Many of the other megachurches have other symbols that express Black theology such as the depiction of a Black Jesus, kente cloth, and reference to Black-group struggle in sermons and church documents.

While many Black megachurches express aspects of Black theology, there is also the tendency for some megachurches to resist identification as religious institutions for African Americans or "Black churches." A few Black megachurches when contacted, indicated they are a church for all people and name the different races that are members of their church. One megachurch assistant pastor stated that although their church is overwhelmingly Black (two or three white people attend), the senior pastor tries not to emphasize racial differences, but instead focuses on "moving beyond race." Another secretary refused to pass the writer's call to an assistant minister at first, rejecting the label "Black church." One church even highlights their racial diversity on their web site (90 percent are Black). A few of these churches draw on the interracial Asuza Street revival movement (the only major interracial religious movement led by a Black person in the United States).

The final continuum on which these Black megachurches rely is a strong emphasis in community development and an emphasis on the members of the church as the commu-

nity (hence the prioritizing of their social, economic and spiritual well-being). These churches may also be described as the categorizing of focus inwardly and outwardly. Whereas most megachurches seem to regard a practical everyday message as important, their area of focus lies on this inward/outward continuum.

Several Black megachurches express the outward focus on community as a part of their mission, which is carried out through their community development activities. For example, Cathedral Second Baptist Church in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, uses the slogan, "Rebuilding lives and the community in the name of Jesus Christ"; they execute this mission with broad-ranging social outreach: job training, social service provision and a range of other activities. They have a community development corporation, including Mercy House, which cares for people who need food and clothing. They also have transitional housing for men.

Allen AME Church in Jamaica, New York also has a commitment to community development and is exemplary in this regard. Led by Pastor Floyd Flake, a former U.S. representative, this church has several different corporations for community development: home health care agency, transportation corporation, housing corporation, women's resource center, senior center, multi-service center, and credit union. They are guided by a mission testimony that embraces community development, an important priority. It reads:

It is the mission of the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church, Jamaica, New York, to effectively minister the Word of God to the people of God through biblical teaching, preaching, and outreach. We believe that we are called to address the needs of the total person, as our Savior did,

and strive to lift the name of Jesus in our community and the world in which we live through our commitment to praise, worship, stewardship, evangelism and economic development.³¹

Other Black megachurches focus on the members of the church (inward) and are more likely to emphasize their financial and spiritual well being. They are more interested in proselytizing—bringing members into their church as their method of outreach. These churches are more likely to emphasize a “prosperity gospel,” which is a focus on the individual prosperity—especially financial prosperity. Many have financial faith confessions, and they heavily emphasize tithing.

The difference between churches that focus inwardly and those that focus outwardly is made clear when looking at the definitions of “outreach ministries.” Some churches consider their television and radio ministry their primary vehicles of outreach, while others envision their social service and community development as primary outreach vehicles.

Conclusion

The rise of Black megachurches is clearly a distinct phenomenon. This conclusion is based on their many characteristics in common—especially their 1980s - 1990s expansion. Their attributes are distinct from both other Black churches and white megachurches. While not primarily located in suburban areas, they are located in areas with large Black sub-

³¹This is the mission statement of Allen AME Church in Queens, New York and is accessible from the church's web site. www.allen-cathedral.org.

urban populations. They reflect a neo-Pentecostal church movement, and they are active participants in community development to various degrees.

Black megachurches exist on a matrix composed of three continuums: the first extends from the "contemporary megachurch" to the "traditional megachurch"; the second extends from the "Afrocentric megachurch" to the megachurch that resists the label "Black Church"; the third extends from the megachurch that discourages civic engagement beyond the church to the megachurch that sees this as part of its mission. As we further explore the intricacies of Black megachurches, these categories will be useful tools of analysis.

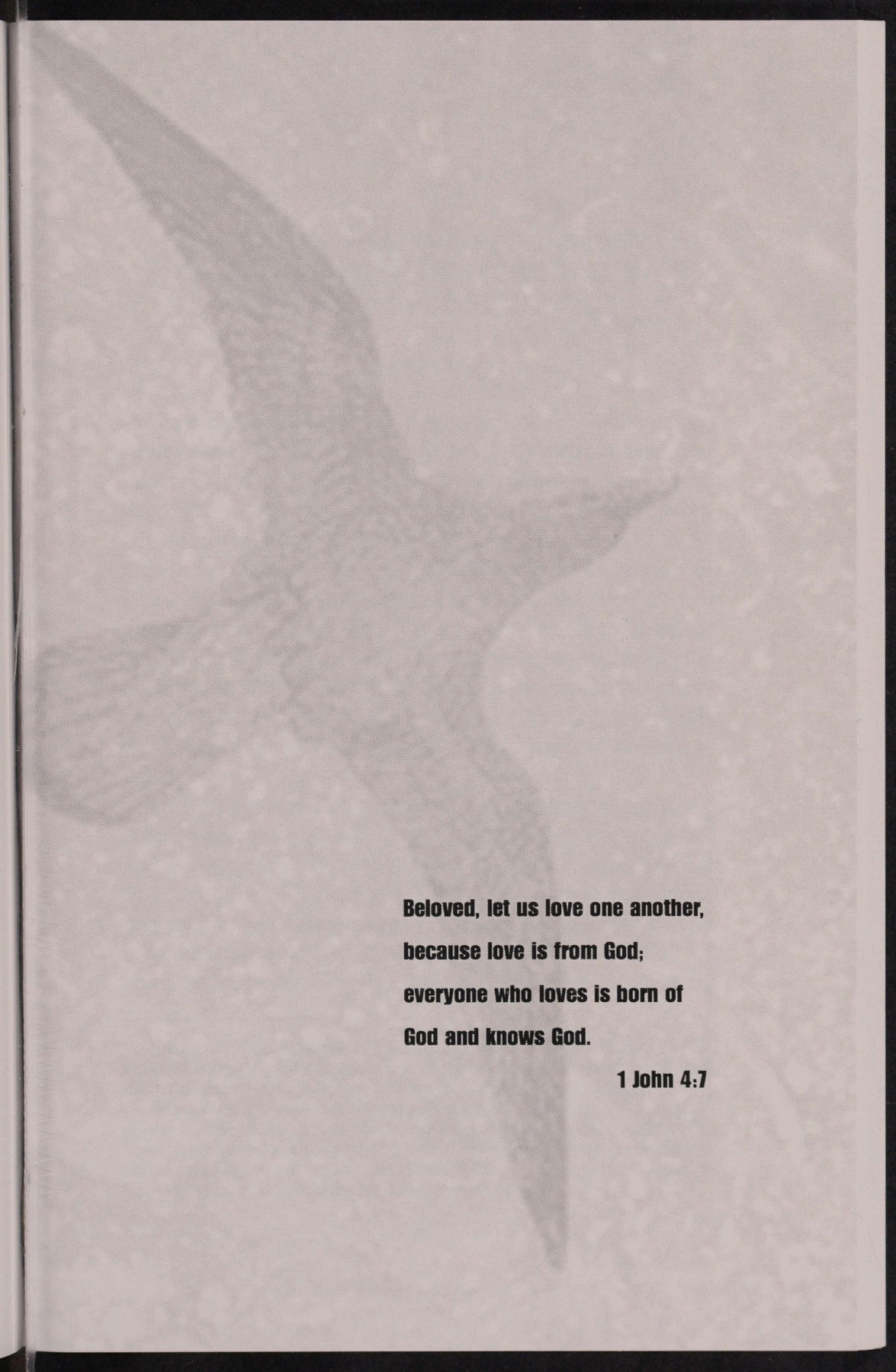
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**Beloved, let us love one another,
because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of
God and knows God.**

1 John 4:7

