

**Prophetic-Pastoral Imagination in an Age of
Sankofa and Post-racialism:
The Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta**

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Introduction

Studying the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta (CBC) is a significant undertaking for a variety of reasons. The most important, however, is that it has had a practice of meeting once a week on Monday mornings, except on national holidays, since 1983. How and why this organization has met regularly for over thirty-two years is a story that needs to be published. This task includes chronicling the religious and public significance for CBC's existence in the eyes of its own membership. It also encompasses the written statements over the years by others who have described the significance of CBC. This article will introduce the reader to the reasons why CBC has had a long and significant history of doing public theology in Atlanta for the length of time that it has.

The main reasons for CBC's thriving continuance can be found in the title of this article. The meaning of the name Sankofa² is based on the Ghanaian emphasis on the Sankofa Bird. The Sankofa Bird is a mystical bird, and this bird took only from its past what it needed for the future. It was an egg. This symbolic meaning embraces a time element which emphasizes that the past is essential to understanding the present. Analogously, the Sankofa orientation to CBC's Prophetic-pastoral Imagination and Civil Rights dimensions grew out of past models of public

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² Sankofa is an Akhan wisdom saying (Ghana) symbolized by a bird that flies forward while its head is tilted backward. Sankofa literally means that it is wise to go back and fetch what was right in the past and utilize it in the present. It is similar the Zimbabwean proverb, *Hwirira sure ine muto*. "Returning to the (good) past (practices) yields desired rewards."

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theology.³ CBC's public theology model emerged from the Civil Rights efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Ebenezer Baptist Church and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church legacies. It is a legacy that is about holistic justice embracing what pastors, congregations, and community activists did during the Civil Rights era and later activist efforts toward liberation.

Sankofa prophetic-pastoral imagination is the term that identifies the legacy of the person-centered Civil Rights approach to ministry. From the definitional point of view, Sankofa prophetic-pastoral imagination is a practical re-conceptualization of the care of persons by drawing on holistic practices and resources from within the church and the community. It draws its focus from the Civil Rights Revolution, and its prophetic and pastoral imagination, and it is all about imaging a new reality focused on justice, mercy and love. It is a tradition that facilitates conceptualizing the practice of a holistic justice dimension of liberating persons from oppression and emphasizes full democratic participation in society. Connected to this holistic imagination is the way African American faith communities have historically drawn on its faith tradition and experience to deal with and overcome racism, injustice, and dehumanization.

Sankofa prophetic-pastoral imagination is all about drawing on communal insight and African American faith resources to fashion a model of ministry that fosters faithful and a meaningful existence despite dehumanization. Sankofa is a symbolic imaginative movement that facilitates African Americans' movement forward drawing on resources from past successful efforts toward liberation and full participation in society.

Key to this Sankofa and prophetic-pastoral imaginative looking to the past are the Civil Rights legacy along with the Black Power and African American cultural revolutions. Its source was the African American pilgrimage throughout the history of the Americas beginning with the slave trade during and after the colonial period. The black church as well as cultural, social organizations, and educational institutions during and following slavery, all embraced the Sankofa pastoral imagination. This tradition has been and will continue to be a reservoir of resources for moving forward.

³ The meaning of prophetic imagination builds on Walter Brueggeman's book entitled *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Louisville: Fortress Press, 2001).

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The reality is that Sankofa prophetic-pastoral imagination and Civil Rights undergird several practices that CBC employs. Some of these practices will be identified and explained in the following the defining of the meaning of prophetic pastoral imagination.

Why Public History of the Concerned Black Clergy Now?

At the American Academy of Religion and The Society for Biblical Literature on November 20, 2010, my colleague in theological education at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, did a lecture on the call to ministry. The concern was raised related to tangible outcomes of the justice movement in contemporary life. The concept of outcomes related to tangible outcomes and expectation of results in an age of post-racialism. Post-racialism was defined as the reversal of justice where the gains of the Civil Rights movement are being dismantled and severely challenged. It is the effort to reverse the gains of justice and return to the way things use to be.⁴

The term post-racialism has been introduced dramatically as a result of the 2016 election approach and what is happening particularly during the Republican primary and the phenomenon of Donald Trump and his call to bar Muslim immigrants from immigrating to the United States. Clearly, this political agenda brings to the foreground the attitudes of many who would like to undermine the goals of a full and integrated society.

As a result of this growing phenomenon of post-racialism, the concern is how should we return to the Civil Rights agenda of the 1950's and 1960's? I am the historian for the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta (CBC), and I am writing a book telling its story. The goal of this article, however, is to set the stage for later telling in book form, how CBC provides one answer to how we can return to the Civil Rights agenda in the twenty-first century.

Indeed, this article explores preliminarily how to return to the Civil Rights agenda of the 1950's and the 1950's. The story of CBC of Atlanta, Georgia began in 1983. This organization provides one strategy for pulling together churches, political organizations, the business community, the medical community, the educational community, and interested citizenry for the purposes of fulfilling the dream of democracy and overcoming post-racialism.

⁴ Edward P. Wimberly's Diary, November 22, 2010.

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This article, then, focuses on the history of the practices that CBC has utilized to recover the Civil Rights agenda and the Beloved Community strategies for the 1980s and beyond. Going forward, the goal here is to begin the story setting the stage for how CBC provides key answers about how to move forward.

Prophetic-Pastoral Imagination

The concept prophetic-pastoral imagination has already been defined focusing on imaging the reign of justice in the United States. Pastoral imagination focuses, however, on the personal dimensions of how to conceptualize the personal dimensions of justice and liberation from social and cultural oppression. The concept talks about how to image and teach within the context of the church the connection of the personal and the social. In *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* the authors talk about strategies that pastors use to engage and address new situations and circumstances that help to transform life using the resources of "inherited religious and academic traditions to convey or model for students' pastoral, priestly, or rabbinic imaginations."⁵ In order to address practical situations, the practices of ministry is a transformative art, and it requires "reinvesting inherited traditions with new meanings and strategies in response to changing circumstances and shifting contexts."⁶ When applied to work of CBC pastoral imagination, CBC draws on the faith traditions that include ministerial practitioners that are primarily Christian, Jewish, and Moslem. Consequently, there needs to be a well thought out understanding of prophetic-pastoral imagination.

Fundamental to CBC's understanding of prophetic-pastoral imagination is the effort to re-conceptualize the Civil Rights Revolution, the Black Power Movement, and the African American Cultural Revolution and imaging how these Sankofa legacies can be applied to a larger number of issues and events in the African American community. What shaped the imagination of CBC have been fundamentally the practices of the Civil Rights Revolution, the Black Power and African American cultural traditions along with the Sankofa focus. These methods of political engagement are related to voting rights efforts and the ending

⁵ Charles R. Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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of segregation. In fact, CBC organizes itself to address a comprehensive list of problems that impact a large number of concerns relating to the lives of African American people.

The first principle of prophetic-pastoral imagination comes from the understanding that the Civil Rights Revolution under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and how he understood the holistic connection between prophetic and pastoral imagination. Later in this introductory chapter, Dr. King's specific contribution to prophetic-pastoral imaginative strategies will be spelled. For the purposes here, however, his ideas about prophetic-pastoral imagination will be introduced.

First, Dr. King's prophetic-pastoral imagination was shaped by his seminary experiences at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania and later at Boston University where he received his Ph. D. But key to his prophetic-pastoral imagination was also his being mentored by his father Martin Luther King Sr. and his ministry at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

For both Martin Luther King Senior and Junior "shepherding the flock" and theological education were essential to ministry. In fact, "Daddy King" was a member of the Board of Trustees at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) and the Board of Morehouse School of Theology when I first began teaching at ITC in 1975.

The reader will see later when the practices of CBC will be introduced, that pastoral empathy for the needs of the parishioners and their social context was central in both Kings' understanding of ministry. Consequently, prophetic-pastoral imagination had fundamentally to do with improving the lives of the parishioners and the people in the surrounding community. Therefore, prophetic-pastoral imagination had to do with the needs of persons and their community. Secondly, prophetic-pastoral imagination had to do with how the pastor drew on the faith tradition and the resources of theological education to carry out ministry in the church and in the community. Thirdly, prophetic-pastoral imagination involved how pastors were to engage the power structures so that the lives of the parishioners would be enhanced. Consequently, prophetic-pastoral imagination had something to do with drawing resources from theological education, developing a method of drawing on traditions of faith and reason, and developing strategies of social engagement with the powers to be using the United States Constitution and the political process. In short, prophetic-pastoral imagination was the process attending to the needs of those in the church and the community, drawing on the church and

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governmental institutions to respond to the needs of the people. Finally, prophetic-pastoral imagination was the drawing on the sanctions from the faith community and governmental resources for the purposes of fashioning and foster models justice.

In the next section the focus will be on the different methods and strategies of prophetic-pastoral imagination growing primarily out of the Civil Rights, the Black Power and African American Revolution. Indeed, CBC benefited from a long Sankofa tradition of prophetic-pastoral imagination such as colleges and theological educational institutions, both black and white: these were central in the development of prophetic-pastoral imagination.

The Signature Practices of CBC

Not only will this article introduce the reasons why CBC has had a long and illustrious practice of significant weekly meetings, it will also identify eight signature practices that have contributed to the success of CBC over the years. Moreover, the ethnographic research approach is the method best fitted for exploring these practices providing the best historical picture for why CBC has been successful over many years.

For this historical study, Mary Moschella's definition of ethnographic research will be used. For her, ethnography is a research methodology useful for studying pastoral practice.⁷ She says it has the best potential for unearthing significant historical reasons for identifying for those who are insiders and outsiders of an organization who want to understand the "why" of an organization's success. This method will help provide CBC its own mirror for those inside and outside CBC to envisage the why of its success.⁸ This research method will be used by CBC members and its followers to promote conversations about best practices that can be used to promote public engagement, civic participation, and practical democracy. This research will also provide a picture of what is going on within the organization and give valuable information when the evaluations of CBC are carried out on a regular basis. This method of research will also provide valuable data for why the organization's institutional effectiveness has been regularly demonstrated over the years.

⁷Mary Moschella, *Ethnology As A Pastoral Practice: Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

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The research method will also provide information on how CBC's historic practices are an outgrowth of the Civil Rights legacy. Other benefits of this research will also be the contributions that this research will make to institutions that are interested in providing effective approaches to ministry, especially those approaches that are long lasting and need to be duplicated.

Moreover, this research will also help to signal to the theological educational community how important it is to link the preparation for ministry with the appropriate student learning outcomes. Consequently, this research project will have significance for assessing how students and faculty within educational institutions help students to develop and assess the prophetic-pastoral imaginations.

The research will also provide valuable data for understanding its existence and work as it fulfills its mission. CBC's mission is to provide leadership, advocacy and service to the homeless, helpless, and hopeless in the community.

The Significance of Ethnographic Research for Studying CBC

Ethnographic research, according to Mary Moschella, is very useful for exploring the impact of prophetic-pastoral practice for at least eight reasons. First, it provides the organization an appropriate mirror in which to look as it identifies the dimensions of its story and as it excavates with due diligence its essential practices. Mirroring here refers to the pictures of the organizations' practices that surface as the research activities are undertaken. These practicing activities define CBC's central identity. There are many practices that have proven to have staying power for over thirty years. The significance of the mirroring dimension is one of those practices of the CBC study, and it enables those involved in CBC's decision making to discover and name the practices that emerge from looking into the mirror at itself in action.

The second ethnographic movement of this research is for the CBC leadership to use it for a self-assessment that grows out of the mirror that the research provides. There are certain practices that appear in the mirror which have become signature activities that have made CBC what it has become over the years. Such practices become essential parts of its self-identity, and such practices need to be identified, evaluated and improved. One such practice has been called the Monday Morning Forum.

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The Monday Morning Forum is a leadership practice that enables the CBC president and committee leaders to develop responsive public decisions and conversation with those attending the forum meeting. These conversations focus on the needs of the poor, downtrodden, left-out, and oppressed. This practice of conversation has many dimensions, and it grows out of the signature practice of the pastoral leader attending to the “crisis of the needy” and neglected.⁹

Key to the forum is the fact that it has emerged as the sign of the central self-identity practice of CBC. When CBC members try to do an organizational assessment, the forum and its standard practices are the first to be addressed. The forum represents an example of participatory democracy. This means that everyone has a voice. When someone wants to speak and has been given permission to speak, the speaker is expected to be treated with respect and kindness. Respect for the speaker is one of the best practices that make the forum a safe space to talk.

The third practice that is important to ethnography is the practice defined as discernment of the presence of God in the forum. There is also prayer from the chaplain or the chaplain designate for that day at the beginning of the forum meeting and at the end of the meeting as well. The expectation is that God’s presence is invoked, and those present are aware of God’s presence when it manifests itself.

A fourth dimension of the ethnographic research method is the practice of community building that takes place. Following the opening prayer at each meeting each person present, no matter how many people who are present, is asked by the president of CBC to give his/her name, the organization that he/she represents, and his/her relationship to CBC. Other community building practices also include practices to provide the rules for how to get the floor for speaking, the establishment of an order for responding to the presenter, the number of questions that can be asked to the speaker during the question and answer period, and gently but firmly stopping questions when the rules are not followed. Key, is the effort to make the forum a safe space for the conversations to take place.

The fifth ethnographic dimension is for the research to spell out the identity formation process taking place during the forum. Identity formation relates to the actual day to day practices that enable the organization to see itself in the mirror. More often than not CBC as an organization envisages itself as providing a space for practicing public

⁹ Edward P. Wimberly, “Forum-ing.”

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theology, where faith perspectives are provided for advocacy and service to the needs of the homeless, helpless, and the hopeless. The role of the executive president of the CBC is to bring theological perspectives to bear on the issues of the forum participants and the program updates related to the agenda. There are always community presenters, and there is an expectation that at some point the problems being addressed at that meeting will be put in a theological perspective.

The sixth ethnographic perspective is helping the community associated with the CBC political engagement to be committed to the principles of Civil Rights as well as to the United States Constitution and particularly its voting rights provisions. Public theology at CBC takes seriously the rights of all human beings to participate in the principles of democracy to the fullest extent of the law spelled out by the Constitution.

Seventh, CBC must also develop its organizational identity through the practices of doing periodic evaluation of how it is carrying out its mission. This also involves evaluation efforts to renew its best practices and the functions of the organization through periodic evaluation. This is one reason why CBC has a stellar record on meeting on Mondays except of national holidays. Attention is given to CBC's organizational life cycle (founding, expansion, stabilization, decline, and renewal) is always taking place particularly through the executive leadership of CBC.

Eighth and finally, CBC's practice of electing successful black pastors of local churches to the presidency of CBC is a practice that has roots in the Ebenezer Baptist Church tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King's identity as a pastor of a local congregation was the platform where he was able to see the needs of people. He was able to lay the foundation where his pastoral ethnographic approach enabled him to identify the needs of people he called the church as well as by the community, government, social agencies, foundations, and educational institutions. In fact, as ethnographic research takes place at CBC, we learn that partnerships with non-church organizations are essential to doing public theology.

The Ethnographic Research Method and The Leadership of CBC

It is clear that the ethnographic method of doing research is the crucial practice for really understanding the success of the forum model that CBC undertakes. I refer to this model as forum-ing. More specifically, forum-ing lends itself to what John Patton, in his book *Pastoral Care in*

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Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care, talks about in the chapter, "The Pastoral Carer as 'Mini Ethnographer.'"¹⁰ He concludes:

The task of ethnography is to discover the story of a particular group of people. The ethnographer attempts to understand the myths, rituals, daily activities. The key ethnographer is one who establishes relationships of trust and collaboration in which further observation can be conducted. The ethnographer is particularly skilled in drawing upon knowledge of the context to make sense of behavior.¹¹

One of the reasons for the more than thirty years of CBC's success meeting every Monday (except on national holidays) is the fact that part of the elected president of CBC's function is to put each Monday morning forum into its proper theological perspective. More specifically, it means that the agenda of each Monday morning forum must be put into line with CBC's understanding of its historic story and mission. This takes place when the president literally couches the agenda of the day in light of CBC's mission and self-understanding. This is significant in that the presidential updates, not only remind the attendees of CBC's mission, but they also help the attendees to discern their self-understanding as a forum for carrying out public theology. In short, the president of CBC becomes a mini ethnographer by helping the membership to update its story and identity weekly.

The Significance of the Prophetic-Pastoral Identity of CBC Leadership

Another key dimension of CBC is that it follows the tradition that all of its presidents since 1983 have been successful black local church pastors. The presidents maintained their pulpits while providing leadership to CBC. Of critical significance is that this practice grew out of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of what it meant to be a pastor and how he actually practiced ministry from the perspective of an ethnographer.

¹⁰ John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 43.

¹¹ Ibid.

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Dr. King understood pastoral ethnography. He did not use the term ethnography at all, but in November of 1948 while in seminary at Crozer Theological Seminary, he wrote a paper entitled “Preaching Ministry.” In it he emphasized that the twentieth century preaching “grows out of the time in which the preacher lives.”¹² He continued:

I think that preaching should grow out of the experience of the people. Therefore, I as a minister must know the problems of the people that I am pastoring. Too often do educated ministers leave the people lost?¹³

It is critical to understand that Dr. King brought to the Civil Rights movement what we call today Sankofa prophetic-pastoral imagination, and it is the awareness of the social context in which his parishioners live. As a seminary student he demonstrated a form of practical theological thinking and reflection that enabled him to envisage how social problems impacted the lives of his parishioners. In his quotation above, he was warning that seminary education needed to include an awareness of the parishioners’ social context. In short, he was promoting a model of what now is being called a mini-ethnographer. That is, Dr. King knew, as a seminary student, that he needed to practice a form of ethnography where he attended to the lives and stories of his parishioners. He understood he had to connect with them and learn from them. He understood the context of racism in which his parishioners were living, and he wanted his seminary education to be something he could utilize throughout his ministry. In the paper he prepared for the classroom, he wrote a statement closely related to how we understand ethnography today. He said:

Above all I see the preaching ministry as a dual process. On the one hand I must attempt to change the soul of the individual so that society may be changed. On the other I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have to change. I am a profound advocate of the social gospel.¹⁴

In short, the seminary student Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that ministry to the soul always had a social and cultural context, and the minister/pastor must develop an approach to ministry that included a pastoral awareness of social context. The implication of his prophetic-

¹² Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, .vol. VI (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 69-71.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 72.

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pastoral imagination is that when doing his pastoral role, he would always have to include assessing the social context in which his parishioners lived. Such assessment led him to practice what is meant by holistic justice. Holistic justice is the practice of justice that includes the soul and spiritual dimensions of the individual and social liberation, as well as the whole person dimensions of participatory democracy. That is, real democracy is enabling each individual to participate in the democratic decisions taking place in society to the full extent of the law.

It is important to point out why we mentioned Dr. King in the connection with being a mini-ethnographer. At least three and perhaps more of the presidents of CBC were mentored at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in the tradition of Daddy King, Dr. King and their successors. For example, at least three were mentored by Dr. Joseph Roberts during his pastoral leadership at Ebenezer.

The major point is that part of the success of CBC and its signature usage of the Monday morning forum practice may be the result of the mini-ethnographic practices carried out by its leadership grounded in the Civil Rights emphasis on social context. The significance of public theology taking place through the use of mini-ethnographic practices could really be the key for the success of the Monday morning forum for so many years. The presidents of CBC as mini-ethnographers provided several practices for the public theological forum where political issues related to justice and democracy were addressed on behalf of the poor, homeless, and oppressed.

The Practice of Mini-Ethnography and Public Theology

Through the use of the mini-ethnographic research model for writing the history of the CBC of Atlanta, it has come to my awareness that the history of CBC is really about telling the story of the practices of CBC. Particular emphasis will be placed on its mission and the practices that it uses to accomplish its mission. The best description of the role of the ethnographic model in helping to write the history is taken from the metaphor used by John Patton called “The Pastoral Carer as “Mini-Ethnographer.”¹⁵ For Patton, the task of the mini-ethnographer “is to discover the story of a particular group of people. The ethnographers

¹⁵ Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context*, 43.

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attempt to understand their myths, rituals, and daily activities.”¹⁶ In addition, they are to make observations based on the trust relationships that have been formed, draw on the knowledge of the context much in the same ways as a participant observer would.

Since my taking over the role as the Historian for CBC, I have been doing research as a participant and observer. Most of all, I have been impressed with the many institutional and organizational practices that characterize CBC’s story. CBC’s working functional identity and mission are wrapped up in its practices, and my effort will be to tell the story of CBC drawing on its practices. Major practices include (1) forum-ing, (2) the presidential legacy and succession, (3) the work of the special committees, (4) the salutes to Black Fathers, (5) the salutes to Black Mothers, (6) the health walk, (7) the Clergy Seminar Lunches, and (8) the Executive Board meeting.

The central goal of each of the practices is to help CBC form public theologians who are finding their own voice and identity as authentic human beings. They understand their call to vocation in the public arena. They embrace the democratic ideal of participating fully in life to the fullest extent as possible. Indeed, the end result of the public theological goal of CBC is to enable its membership to internalize the democratic goal of full participation in society as well as to enable others to exercise the same end.

The Formation of a Public Theologian

The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a mini-ethnographer included his ability to use his personal encounters with his parishioners to discern how difficult it was for his parishioners to grow and develop in a racially segregated society. At the core, the racially charged world of an unjust society was thought of in material terms alone, and there was a separation of the physical and spiritual.¹⁷ Moreover, the private was separated from the public and personal ethics was separated from public ethics as well. The end result was that personal agency was separated from political

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 82-97.

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efficacy.¹⁸ What Dr. King understood in his understanding of personal agency was that it would lead to the development of political efficacy.¹⁹ Dr. King understood that "undermining self-awareness is one of the major political strategies of racism. Getting a people to doubt their worth and value as human beings by creating images of worthlessness protects the racial position a social status. Thus, enabling African Americans and other socially devalued persons to practice self-awareness is the first step in undercutting the impact of racism."²⁰

Indeed, Dr. King knew that self-awareness as a practice of self would lead to public awareness. Related is the fact that personal agency will lead to enabling political awareness and efficacy as well. The key point is that developing our individual selves leads to social agency and awareness of the needs of others.

Moving Forward

The major concern of this history of CBC is to explore why CBC has been in existence from 1983. The answer is that CBC envisages very clearly that it is impossible to separate the private spheres of existence. Life is holistic, and CBC has allowed this principle to influence its life from its inception up until the present. In the upcoming chapters of the book, the history of CBC will be examined in light of the eight signature practices of what is called Sankofa pastoral imagination. Sankofa Pastoral imagination is defined as the African American legacy of holistic thinking about ministry demonstrated by the ministry of justice spelled out in the 1948 paper of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. entitled "Preaching Ministry.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84-86

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ Ibid., 84-86.

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