Interdenominational Theological Center

Creating Churches Without Walls:
Reconnecting the Disconnect Between Our Black Youth and Young Adults and
the Black Church

A Doctor of Ministry Research Project
Submitted to the faculty of Interdenominational Theological Center
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Ministry

Disconnected Youth

By

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Atlanta, Georgia
May 2018

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Abstract

Creating Churches Without Walls: Reconnecting The Disconnect Between Our Black Youth And Young Adults And The Black Church

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Barbara Jean Fitzhugh
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140 Pages

Within the churches of the First Episcopal Region of the Christian Methodist Church, our spiritual leaders are more concerned with the distinctiveness of traditions rather than allowing the youth and young adults to exhibit the "essence" of their faith, and ideas. The aim of this study was for the researcher to find a possible solution to give voice, adequate space, and intentional listening ears to black youth and young adults of our church. Two key questions addressed in the study are as follows: (1) What can the Black church do to meet the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of Millennials and Post-Millennials? and (2) Why it is important to be a part of a caring supportive congregation? A focus group and theater, employing improvisation as the format, was used as a fun, creative way to capture the participants' stories, ideas, and insights in order to express their feelings of disconnect and neglect fostered by the actions and attitudes of the church and those who are in leadership positions.   The members of the focus group concluded that the church leaders need to allow youth and young adults to provide leadership, ideas, and vision, so that they will continue to be an integral part of the church. I suggest that pastors and youth and young adult leaders become intentional

listeners to the youth and young adults within their local congregations. The project resulted in changing the dynamics of how the pastor and officers of the church interact with, as well as, perceive the role of the youth and young adults within that local congregation. Since the conclusion of the project, the youth and young adults are *intentionally* included in the planning process of worship and ministry.

Dedication

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth
not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
Timothy 2:15 KJV

The majority of my life has been dedicated to obtaining knowledge, especially a deeper understanding of the Word of God. I dedicate this Doctor of Ministry Project Paper in memory of my late husband who always served as a source of encouragement and moral support, also, in memory of my youngest daughter who refused to allow me to give up when my goal of pursuing my degree appeared to be out of reach. I dedicate this work to my sister Mattie who is always willing to do whatever she can to help me reach my goal of completing my project paper, and to all the citizens of Hardeman County who gave of their unconditional love, finance, words of encouragement, and unceasing prayers. And finally, I dedicate this project paper to my second season, Dewey Bowen (the new love of my life) who continues to support my work, and my all-and-all without whom I would have never made it this far--my Lord and my Savior Jesus the Christ

Acknowledgements

There have been many individuals who have given of their time, talents, and resources to help complete the work necessary to complete this Doctor of Ministry Project Paper and they are as follows.

First, I would like to thank Bishop E. Lynn Brown and Bishop Henry M. Williamson, Sr. for all of their support and words of encouragement.

To the owners and employees of Maxwell's Big Star for being so supportive of my efforts to raise the funds needed for tuition.

To Rev. Steven Mayhorn and the officers and members of Saint Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church for their support and use of their facilities.

To all of the focus group participants for volunteering their time and talents for the implementation of my project.

To the young adult counselors at the Carl Perkins Center for Abused Children for sharing their personal testimonies concerning their faith-walk.

To my cohort professors Anne and Edward Wimberly for all their leadership, wisdom, and knowledge that has served as the foundation and supporting pillars of my continued understanding within my field of study.

To Melody Berry, and Rev. Dr. Carolyn McCrary for being intentional listeners when I needed a wailing wall.

Finally, to my daughter and son Rev. Tiffany Lyons, and Rev. Johnny Wayne Fitzhugh, II, my grandchildren, family, and friends for all their support, prayers, patience, and love throughout this journey.

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Introduction

Oftentimes, I have heard leaders say that the youth and young adults are the church of tomorrow, but I believe and declare that they are the church of today. Those in authority within the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as the Black church universal, must be willing to intentionally give voice, adequate space, and intentional listening ears to the Black youth and young adult members of each congregation. In my experiences as a pastor, the willing workers in my former congregations were youth and young adults. They were always ready to go beyond the walls, and were willing to think outside of the box, whereas the senior congregants were content to just go through the motions of church but not according to knowledge nor with any passion for ministry.

Because the youth and young adults had a zeal for Christ and a passion for true ministry, it enabled me to nurture an atmosphere that was welcoming and conducive to spiritual growth and community outreach, which, in turn resulted in the church becoming a positive change agent within its community. That is the reason I decided to approach the problem in a welcoming round-table, unfiltered discussion that is focused on allowing our Black youth and young adults to voice their thoughts on the Black church and how it does or does not meet, reach, nor teach about the challenging issues that Black youth and young adults face daily in the 21st Century.

A Call for Response

If the disconnect plaguing our Black youth and young adults in relation to the Black church is to be corrected, it will require a deliberate response and an intentional effort on the part of those in leadership positions within the Black church and its congregations. They must be ready and willing to become intentional listeners to the anguished cries of our Black youth and young adults with the intent to create programs that will meet their spiritual, social, and emotional need to be heard within the Black church setting. The following pages reflect the project plan I undertook to address that need.

Why This Project

Within the life of the First Episcopal District of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, (C. M. E.), our youth and young adults are oftentimes overlooked, disrespected, and discouraged from having an active, daily, meaningful involvement and voice in the workings of the church. During our annual conference, as well as our annual learning institute, little, if any substantial teaching, or programming is fully geared to meet the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of the youth and young adults. During one learning conference, our youth and young adults were blatantly used as mere momentary ornaments and puppets to be manipulated by the elder leaders of the conference in such an uncaring, unconcerned way. The youth and young adults were forced to sing very traditional songs that clearly had little or no meaning to them. Their praise was stifled by spiritless traditional worship orchestrated by the more *seasoned* saints with no regard to the youth and young adults' desire for free, unbridled worship.

The youth and young adults' demeanor in response to the leaders lack of concern for their spiritual well-being was one of despair and disconnect. Many of the pastors, including myself, shed tears over the agony we saw in the faces of the youth and young adults. We made it a point to address the matter during the presentation of our overview of the conference.

The pain and despair in the attitudes of the youth displayed within that C. M. E. Annual Conference was overwhelming. It is for this very reason, among others, that I chose to explore the issue of disengaged, disconnected Black youth within our congregations, and how this disconnect is influenced by the theological, psychological, sociological, as well as, economical influences upon their lives. Most importantly, I chose to find a way to give adequate space, and intentional listening ears to Black youth and young adults.

Life Experiences

My twenty-six-year-old daughter was a born-again Christian, as well as a called minister of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ and her immature twenty-four-year-old husband was just the opposite. Unlike Camille, Johntate had not been given a stable Christian up-bring. He had not been raised in a stable, healthy home environment. His young preteen mother had abandoned him at a very young age leaving him to raise himself. Thus, he grew up and matured like a wild weed in an open field with no boundaries, morals, or true code of ethics to go by. He was a prime example of a disconnected Black youth who had been labeled disposable by society. When society views our youth as less than, and in turn, treats them as less than human, our Black

youth and young adults respond and retaliate in animalistic, rage-fueled, unbridled ways that have no or very little moral compass.

This vein of thought was devastatingly made a reality for me on September 15, 2016. Although my twenty-six-year-old daughter and her twenty-four-year-old husband did not fall into the 10-19-year-old group, most normally highlighted in violent alternatives, they were added to the list of statistics for death/suicide by gun violence for the year 2016 for it was on this day that my daughter Camille was brutally executed in front of me and her four small children ages 7, 6, 4, and 3 years of age. She was shot execution-style over ten times with a 9mm. gun by her soon-to-be ex-husband.

I realized that there is a need for the church and those in leadership to respond to the cries of our Black youth and young adults who are crying out to be heard. We must address the issues of barriers and mistreatment caused by race, class, and gender bias; the lack of focus on holistic ministries; and the misunderstanding of true urban ministry and ministry beyond the walls of our churches.

I discovered that these issues are confirmed in Cheryl S. Sanders' book, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth, and the Poor* (1997). Sanders deals with the issue of the disregard for our youth. The writer shines a brighter light on the issue of promoting a more in-depth focus, and deeper commitment to eradicating social injustice for all people on the part of the Christian community. To accomplish this goal, Sanders presents four central themes: The affirmation of the prophetic call to ministry by God given to youth as well as men and women alike; the importance of urban ministry's focus on the mental, physical, as well as the spiritual

well-being of youth and children; the building of meaningful relationships with the poor; and understanding these aspects of marginal urban ministry in the light of the ministry of Jesus the Christ. The basic content of the book is divided into four sections that cover topics dealing with Gospel Ethics, woman's place in prophetic ministry and ministry with marginalized children and youth, as well as the need for breaking down barriers. In what follows, I will explore aspects of the call for response in dialogue with the writings of Cheryl Sanders.

The Issue of Race, Class, and Gender Bias

According to Sanders, the biggest task facing the Church remains its ability to evaluate the effects of race, sex, class, and power upon the life of the church, as well as, on society. To accomplish this, the Church must maintain the ethical gospel established by Jesus based on moral reflection, principles, and practices reflected through Jesus teachings, along with, Jesus' call to a personal relationship with God to all humankind regardless of their race, creed, ethnic background, or social status. Sanders believes that building this relationship will result in the individual's experiencing personal salvation and a desire to promote social justice for all people through work and witness (Sanders 1997, 13-14). I truly believe this to be true because Jesus is love, and when one comes into a true relationship with Christ, the result is the manifestation of an overwhelming love and concern for the whole of humanity, including your enemies.

Sanders points out that justice is the most important by-product of righteousness. It must be present if we are to be able to honestly reflect the true will

and nature of God; and justice must be our motive for mission if it is to be effective. Per Sanders' theological premise, accountability, compassion, and empathy are the three ethical principles of justice; accountability expressed through scriptures promoting a fear or sincere reverence of God; compassion as promoted through the parables that focus on concern and care for others above one's self; and empathy displayed through treating others as you would like them to treat you (Sanders 1997, 15). I have found in my experience with urban ministry, that if all these elements are not an invaluable part of a church's ministry and mission, it is doomed for failure.

In dealing with the issue of woman in ministry, Sanders points out that God did not give humanity dominion over each other, but, rather, over the rest of creation. Humanity was created to be God's family, and she implies that the creation of woman represents God's attempt to give man a helper that is equal to him in every way using the passage from Genesis chapter two as her point of reference. Woman is not Adam's subordinate but his divinely appointed equal, (Sanders 1997, 44).

Although women have been licensed and ordained in my church setting for decades, there is still a spirit of rejection and denial of a woman's God-given authority to serve as servant leaders within the church. Kerri Day in her book *Unfinished Business: Black Women the Black Church, and the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, states, "Poor black women continue to experience inequity in employment and work," (Day*, Unfinished Business,* 2012, 62). Although Day is dealing with the secular workforce. I find the same to be true for my setting experience in regard to consideration for appointments to pastoral charges.

Oftentimes, women are overlooked, or appointed to small, struggling congregations with little or no salary for pastoral positions that they are overly qualified to perform in favor of men who may not have a high school diploma, or/and who have no pastoral experience, but because they are men, they receive appointments to more stable, financially sound churches. There have been many times when the Bishop has received messages and letters from congregations requesting that he not appoint a woman as their pastor. The impact on the lives of young adults is real! Very few of our young adult females are appointed to a congregation as the Preacher-In-Charge. In many cases, they are relegated to positions within the Christian Education Department of their local congregations, or are used as glorified secretaries, babysitters, or youth leaders within their churches, (Sanders 1997, 59).

The struggle for equality within the clerical community of my church is an ongoing battle, especially for our youth (ranging in age from 13-18) and young adult female ministers. In giving voice to the voiceless members of our church, I hope to shed more light upon this issue as well as those I have already mentioned.

The Issue of Insufficient Response to the Needs of the Whole Person

In her book, Sanders infers that the kingdom's mandate of unconditional compassion must focus on a holistic ministry that considers the needs of the whole person (Sanders 1997, 29). In my opinion, a holistic ministry not only addresses the spiritual needs of the congregants, but it also deals with the physical needs such as food, shelter, clothing; financial needs such as money for bills, help connecting with gainful employment, help with transportation, and medical expenses; and help with

psychological issues such as addiction counseling, mental illness or, at the least, they are able to supply a list of resources the congregants can use.

A holistic ministry is concerned with making sure that members have access to academic resources to help them achieve their scholastic goals. I find this aspect of ministry to be lacking within the confines of the conference in which I serve. Although they have scholarships that are awarded by some of the auxiliaries, I do not feel that those scholarships are equally dispersed to those who truly are in need. There is an established program within the conference that is designed to pair the local church with the local school system, but because of the apparent apathy towards our youth and children, very few congregations are willing to participate. The focus of my setting is church growth for bragging rights and financial stability for the congregation. Very little focus is placed on the whole person. True ministry involves more than just preaching and teaching from the pulpit, but it requires getting down into the pit with the people and working from ground zero.

The Issue of Misplaced Understanding of Spiritually Guided Urban Ministry Leadership

Sanders points out that those of us who participate in urban ministry may not receive words of gratitude from those we serve but it is not about receiving personal accolades, but the edification of the body of Christ. Those faithful warriors who focus on holistic ministry become God's answer to the prayers of the marginalized giving life to the promises of God, becoming the living embodiment of God's love towards mankind, (Sanders 1997, 29).

The Church must become an active Christian presence in and through the community. The Black church must become a viable catalyst for positive change and this can only happen when the church becomes an active, visible presence within the community. Presently, St. Paul C. M. E. Church (consisting of a small congregation located in a small rural community) has no outreach ministries in place, nor do they participate as a church in community services that seek to meet the needs of those less fortunate. Church ministry must focus on giving back and not selfish gain; not personal prosperity but positive life-giving community progress through community participation and presence.

Christ left no stone unturned, but his life and ministry served not only as a living example of a person born on the margins of life, but as an example of how we are to minister to the marginalized. How we react to God's mandate for dealing with human suffering serves as evidence of our spiritual affiliation, for the Bible tells us that how we show love to one another is how people will know that we are disciples of Christ (John 13:34-35). Although this may appear to be a thankless job, when our ministry is rooted in a love for God and God's people as well as a desire to do God's will, our work is never in vain. Also, the practice of empathy, per Sanders, is the Church's way of responding to God's goodness towards humanity, (Sanders 1997, 36).

The remaining two sections of Sanders' book deals with ministry to children and youth as well as the importance of reconciliation. I agree with Sanders in her assumption that the entire Church community should share in the nurturing of our children and youth, for God holds us accountable for what is instilled into the hearts

and minds of our youth. By focusing on positive reinforcement and role models, it can only motivate a spirit of reconciliation in our community, (Sanders 1997, 65).

Sanders uses for a reference the biblical account of the priest Eli and his sons. For Sanders, the number one call for parents is to raise their children up in obedience to God constantly monitoring what mental meals are being fed to their children through the media (Sanders 1997, 70-71). We must listen to our children, never putting them before the will of God, but understanding their needs and wants within the confines of the will of God. We must allow our youth to speak truth to their desire to be respected as a viable part of God's kingdom, who have an equal share in the blessings of God regardless of where they live, the color of their skin, or their economic status.

Church leaders and parents cannot continue to lend a deaf ear to our urban youth and young adults and expect the outcome to be a positive one in their spiritual, emotional, and social growth. Sanders reminds the reader that individual parenting of children can have a positive or negative impact on the entire community (Sanders 1997, 68-69). We must remember that we have been called to commitment and not comfort. Moreover, I feel that the Black church, especially within my setting, has become comfortable with the practice of overlooking and disregarding their needs, and silencing the voices of Black youth and young adults.

Also, using Eli's neglect of his sons as a reference, Sanders states that the high rate of sexuality and teen pregnancy that plagues our communities can be attributed, not just to a lack of self-esteem, but to a lack of parental supervision (Sanders 1997, 72). I agree whole-heartedly with her analysis, because many times I have wondered

when I see the streets filled with very young, unsupervised youth, where are the parents? In most cases, these children are unchurched, along with their parents which, I believe, contributes to their unfortunate circumstances, delinquency and sense of disconnect from the Black church and society. I do not consider teen mothers and fathers as delinquents; however, it has been my experience that a lack of positive parental involvement and church participation in the lives of Black youth can result in negative sexual behavior resulting in unwanted pregnancies. Christian Smith in his article entitled, "Theorizing Religious Effects Among American Adolescents," seems to reflect my opinion when he states,

> Several decades of social scientific studies have shown that religion is often a factor in the lives of American adolescents, influencing their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. […]. A systemic review of the literature on religion and youth reveals notable patterns of religious influences among American adolescents. […]. A large majority of studies, for example, that have included religion measures (especially church attendance and importance of religious faith) have found them to be inversely related to juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and to delinquency, […]. (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor 1996), (Smith 2003).

A Personal Journey Toward the Call

In the following pages, I will reflect on how my own personal journey has fueled my passion to seek answers and solutions to the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults to the Black church.

My Theological Soul Story

My spiritual quest for theological development began in a small town in Grand Junction, Tennessee where the church held a prominent place in the spiritual nurturing and academic development of the youth within the community.

My base of Christian formation was a very traditional Baptist Church revered as the premier spiritual headquarters comprised of the most influential individuals within the area. The name of the church was Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church dating back to the early 1930's.

It served as the epic center for the Civil Rights Movement within that county. Many of the congregants, as well as their off-springs, were very vocal concerning the injustices that permeated within the county and surrounding areas during that time. Several of the more illuminated educators and community activist were blessed to be participants in the March on Washington on August 27-28, 1963, a moment in time that changed the course of history.

Attending church services, and especially Sunday School, were mandates for the majority, if not all, the youth, and young adults in the surrounding communities. Parents would begin preparing for the Lord's Day two to three days in advance. Our Sunday best was reverently pressed and hung in its proper place. The Sunday meal was prepared on Saturday so that all family members would be free and available to participate in all church activities. The homes were cleaned, and landscapes meticulously manicured to perfection in anticipation of visiting friends and family on Sunday evening for fireside chats and love-fueled fellowship.

Problem Identified

On the surface, it appeared to be the perfect environment for spiritual nurturing for those young saplings seeking the life-giving rays of personal inclusion, validation, sense of self, and sense of connection within the all-inclusive arms of a loving

congregation. However, at the core, the traditions of that time, as it is today, of children in the church being only seen and not heard, only served to strengthen the chains that bound the youth, festering a spiritual, emotional, and physical disconnect between the lambs and the church.

Growing up as a youth in this very stifling environment where I was not encouraged to experience God on my own terms based on my adolescent understanding was very challenging to my spiritual growth. We were invisible to the elders of our community and were expected to see, understand, and worship God based on their theological understandings of and personal relationships with God.

Children, youth, and adults alike, were not allowed to express a desire for a relationship with God except once a year during the fall revival, and only if you were at least the age of twelve or in the year of your twelfth birthday. At the fall revival of my fifteenth year, I witnessed the devastating results of this traditional, spiritual constriction first hand. A young boy within our congregation sought to be allowed to come to Christ, but, because he was only ten years of age, he was not allowed to do so by his parents. The young boy was devastated.

Despite his heart wrenching pleas to be heard, to be allowed to come unto Christ as he was, his pleas went ignored by family members and church leaders whose eyes had been blinded, contaminated, and disabled by tradition and spiritual disconnect.

As a pastor and a twenty-seven-year member of the clerical community, I see this same scenario playing out repeatedly. It is for this very reason I have chosen to endeavor to explore the issue of disengaged, disconnected Black youth within our

congregations, and how this disconnect is nurtured by the theological, psychological, sociological, as well as, economical influences upon their lives.

A Framework for Response

In the following paragraphs I will outline how I endeavored to discover and utilize ways to overturn the predicament I believe our Black youth and young adults face as has been addressed in the previous paragraphs.

Plan for Carrying Out the Project

This project spanned a period of two months in which, after acquiring signed releases from the participants, I planned meetings and video taped group discussions focused on youth and young adults held once a week at a time and day that was convenient for those who participated. At the end of the project, with the help of the group, we put together a play entitled the "Summer Theater Project: Giving Voice to the Voiceless" that reflected the problem and possible solutions that were gleaned from the open discussions. I planned to present the play with the permission of the Preacher-In-Charge at St. Paul for the congregation and the surrounding community.

I used the qualitative method involving a focus group and observations of this group. The methodology included the sharing of personal reflections, and group discussions. The original plan was for the group to be comprised of black and white youth and young adults ranging between the ages of 13 to 27 which was to include two Caucasian young adult females ranging in age between 21 and 24 years of age. Their occupations focused on counseling at risk Black youth and young adults that are victims of emotional trauma, and social situations that have left them disconnected, and feeling

isolated from family members, school, and their familiar social environment. Although they were not African American young adults, I believed that their work experience, and past struggles with their own feelings of spiritual disconnect experienced during their teenage and early young adult years, would add valuable insight into the discussion and the quest for answers to the problems facing our Black youth and young adults.

The group was also to include a twenty-five-year-old Black Christian homosexual male who served as the minister of music at his local church and, professionally, worked as a crisis counselor for children and youth. I believed that his participation in the focus group would serve to give voice to those suffering in silence in the Black church community, who are youth and young adults struggling to reconnect with a tradition that sees members of the LGBT community as being unfit, unclean, unwanted, and unloved by God.

I initially planned to include two young males standing at the threshold of young adulthood. They were high school seniors preparing to celebrate their eighteenth birthday, standing at the precipice of liberation from dependent to self-sufficient. Soon, they would transition into the overwhelming world of adulthood and personal independence from being under the authority and watchful eye of their parents. These two young Black men had been active in their local church all their lives, but soon, they would be facing, (and probably would have been dealing with it during the time of this project), pressure from their peers to become less religious and take on the millennial mentality of declaring themselves as being 'spiritual'.

All these outstanding youth and young adults would have served as members of a reality round-table discussion of their experiences with the church reflecting on the negative aspects, as well as the positive aspects of being who they are as practicing Christians. I had invited and encouraged them to define the church as they had experienced it, and how they saw its place and importance in meeting the needs of youth and young adults in the 21st Century. Unfortunately, due to work and scheduling conflicts, the original volunteers were unable to fulfill their obligations leaving me with the daunting task of recruiting others to participate in the focus group which I will discuss in more detail in later chapters which focus on the limitations and obstacles I encountered during the implementation of the project, along with the method and methodology I employed.

Leaders: Who Are They and What was Expected

The leaders engaged first were pastors or servant leaders of St. Paul and the surrounding churches, especially those of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church within my conference, for they, *we,* set the standard that most congregants strive to reach. James Emery White in his book, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated,* makes the following statement:

> We know we are to be witnesses; we are to make disciples; we are to do justice, love, mercy, feed the hungry, and care for the widow and orphan. This is obviously far from pursuing a privatized faith. We know we are called to be present in culture as salt. That, of course, can and often should lead to transformation—but more to the point, it can lead to renewal. (White 2014, 102)

My purpose was to awaken those who served in teaching capacities or leadership positions in the congregation. Even though the pastor may be looked upon

as the primary authority-head within the congregation, their interaction with the youth and young adults is limited in comparison to those members who serve as the educators and group leaders, for they are members of the congregation as well as the community wherein the Black church, in general, is located.

In many cases, the pastor's involvement is limited to Sunday morning worship, or adult bible studies, where as many, if not the majority, of youth/young adult leaders and teachers of the church are active residents within the community. They may be employed as school teachers, city officials, and/or community activists who are in frequent contact with members of the church, thus, having a greater influence over the mental, emotional, and spiritual discourse of the congregation.

From St Paul, I enlisted the wise counsel of the acting pastor, the Christian Education Director, and the indispensable advice of my cohort leaders. I enlisted the cooperation of the pastor and Christian Ed. Director for the afore mentioned reasons. I also looked to my cohorts to help me to maintain my theological, and academic integrity.

Personal Outcome Expectations

My anticipated outcome of this project was that the youth/young adults of this congregation will have a greater sense of connectivity to the church, a deeper passion for establishing a deeper relationship with Christ, and have a more focused, sustainable faith. I also hoped to give voice to those who have gone unheard and unengaged by the leaders and adult members of the congregation.

As for me, by the end of this journey, I hoped to have gained the knowledge necessary to be a more effective servant leader within my church as well as within the community. I hoped to be able to better understand the challenges facing our youth/young adults, and, in turn, can apply that knowledge in such a way that I can reach those who have been unreachable, to encourage those youth and young adults who have felt disengaged and unimportant to those who are assigned by God with the responsibility to seek out what is best for their social, emotional, educational, economical, and spiritual welfare.

From this opportunity, my ambition is to become an intentional listener to those individuals who have felt muzzled by society and the Black church. Also, I hoped to come away with a refreshed, enlightened understanding of what it means to be young and different in a society that promotes conformity as being the only true evidence of a righteous life, and then transform that knowledge into a welcoming, inviting bridge that stretches the length of the gap between our Black youth and young adults and the Black church.

Some Guiding Views: Descriptive Definitions

Before positive change can be made or problems solved, one must understand and define what the problem is and understand the meaning of the terminology used to describe it.

The Title of the Project

My title reflects the problem considered to be universal in its prominence by experts in the field of ministry dedicated to the restoration of our youth/young adults

back to the church, and back into a right relationship with Christ. The questions remain: How do we stop the overflowing disconnect and disengagement of our Black youth/young adults within the Black church? How do we create a church without walls? How do we reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults to the Black church?

Before I could tackle these and other questions, I first needed to understand what the key words in the title of my problem meant. King Solomon states in Proverbs 4:7, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding." (KJV). In the Wycliffe Bible Commentary, editors Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everette F. Harrison translation is clear, "With all thy getting. Better, in all that thou hast acquired. Get understanding. There is not here a progress—Don't stop at wisdom; get real understanding," (Pfeiffer and Harrison 1962, 560).

Church Without Walls

As a child, I believed that the church was the building in which we worshiped. It was the brick and mortar in which we gathered every Sunday morning to sing, shout, eat, and say amen. I believed that the church that the pastor proclaimed would one day be taken out of the world by God was the actual building and only those who could be inside that building at that rapturous moment would be able to go to heaven with Jesus. However, as I grew in the knowledge of Christ, I began to understand that the church is more than the building, and in essence, that the people are the true Church.

So, is that what it means to be a church without walls? Is it simply recognizing that the people and not the building is the church? Jim Petersen in his blog "Church

Without Walls: Moving Beyond Traditional Boundaries," states,

> When we look at the Church, we view it through a traditional paradigm. For example, we all know churches have sanctuaries, pulpits, pews, and a clergy. For us it's difficult to think of a church without any of these familiar components. But what if, for some reason, it suddenly became impossible to have these things? Would the church cease, or could we change our paradigm and carry on? God's people started without any of these things, and did very well. And God's people in East Asia have functioned basically without any of these resources for the past forty years. (Petersen 1992, 18-19)

In other words, although we have adapted the custom of building great edifices to worship in that we proudly identify as 'the Church,' we must recognize that the Church is not bricks and mortar, but human flesh and blood.

The ministry in Jacksonville, Florida that bears the name, the Church Without Walls, I feel, embodies the definition I hold to be true. Per their website, "Church Without Walls' is a ministry that reaches across typical social boundaries to create a community that is welcoming, nurturing, and transformative. […]. We practice a ministry of presence with our brothers and sisters wherever they are with a special focus on those who most often are overlooked, forgotten, or rejected," (Worldpress.com 2012).

The description of the Church Without Walls best describes my concept of what it means to create churches without walls. It means more than just physically stepping outside of the four walls of your building, but it means tearing down all the emotional, social, as well as spiritual and traditional walls that the Black church has built up over the years which only serve to promote a sense of disconnect, disenfranchisement, and dis-ownership in the hearts of our black youth/young adults in respect to the Black church.

The Black Church

I was raised in the Black church. In the past, it served as the central most important organization in the Black community. Anything or any issue of importance that affected the Black community found its platform first in the Black church. It served as the strength and the backbone of the Black community. Per a 2002 article posted on the website African American Registry entitled, "The Black Church: A Brief History," the writer states,

> This institution which was the first source of land ownership for slaves in America (with human character of black people) is viewed as the reason and savior of oppressed African people in the United States. […]. Nevertheless, African slaves established and relied heavily on their churches. Religion offered a means of catharsis…. Africans retained their faith in God and found refuge in their churches." (Aaregistry.org 2002)

The Black church is more than just a group of baptized believers, but it is a source of connection between God and the Black community. It is communication central for those seeking to speak to and hear from God for answers to their day-to-day issues. The Black church represented a place of love and belonging, (and for many it still does), for those youth, young adults, and senior adults who counted themselves as members of the congregation.

However, somewhere along the way, the Black church began to slip from its place of importance, thus resulting in a disconnect between the Black church and the Black community-at-large, especially that of our Black youth/young adults. Alex McFarland and Jason Jimenez in their book *Abandoned Faith: Why Millennials are Walking Away and How You Can Lead Them Home* infers that twenty percent of Millennials under the age of thirty despite of active youth involvement in church

activities, eventually, become dissatisfied with and abandon the faith upon leaving home, "because of their doubts, their skepticism, and the hypocrisy they witnessed in the church. They simply abandon their faith," (McFarland and Jimenez 2017, 44).

Some experts in the field of study believe it lies in a breakdown in communication. Michael Robert Crudge in his PhD thesis, "*The Disconnected Church: A Critical Examination of the Communication of the Christian Church in New Zealand,*" stated, "In its most basic form, communication is the establishment of common ground in terms of shared understanding. If there is no common ground, there is an inability to reach shared understanding, which means there will be an inability to communicate effectively," (Crudge 2013, 5).

Crudge's research concludes that the primary reason for the disconnect is the lack of effective communication. The author goes on to explain,

> In other words, this research investigates the issue around communication and the church, and is therefore situated in the communication problem. My research is based on the proposition that the Christian Church in New Zealand is maladapted to contemporary society. By maladaption, I mean, specifically, that the church is failing to meet its own claims to be relevant, is failing to connect individual's spirituality with their profane daily lives and exhibits a diminishing capacity to manifest good in the world. (Crudge 2013)

Although this study involved a church thousands of miles away, his conclusions only proves the point that I made earlier, that this is not just a problem within the Black church, but one that is universal in nature, but because of limitations, I only focused on the Black church.

Post-Millennials and Millennials (Youth/Young Adults)

Who are the Millennials and Post-Millennials? The Millennials and Post Millennials are those individuals born between the years of 1980-2000. Per Thom S. and Jess W. Rainer, "They will be the dominant adult population during that period [21st Century], and thus many organizations will seek to win their favor. Indeed, some organizations are already getting the message today and responding accordingly. The Millennials will be moving into positions of power and influence as this new millennium progresses," (Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials* 201, 12).

This fact, as well as numerous others, is why I think it is important that the Black church must begin to address this problem immediately to help ensure the survival of the black church as we know it. John Drane in his article printed in the March 2006 addition of the International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, entitled, *"The Emerging Church,"* addresses the urgency by stating, "Though church attendance is still reasonably healthy in many parts of the USA, recent research documents the growing popularity of new forms of faith activity such as home churches, marketplace ministries, and cyber church. The prediction is that even those who follow the teachings of Christ and are committed to regular prayer, Bible reading, and spiritual direction will in the future be doing so without any formal connection with congregational life," (Drane 2006, 3-11).

The C.M.E. Church considers the youth to be those individuals ranging from age twelve to age seventeen, although some experts in the field such as Wimberly,

Barnes, and Johnson begin at the age of eleven, (Wimberly et al.2013, 58). Sadly, in

society today, youth are considered as disposable. Giroux proclaims,

> The new government of insecurity has reshaped welfare through punitive
> policies that criminalize poverty, push people into workfare programs so as to
> force them into menial labor and use incarceration as the primary tool of making
> such populations disappear. As Loic Wacquant has argued, "Poverty has not
> receded but the social visibility and civic standing of the trouble making poor
> have been reduced" (2009: 291). Moreover, we have witnessed in the last few
> decades the rise of a **punishing state** that offers relief not to the poor but from
> the poor, by forcibly 'disappearing' the most disruptive of them, from the
> shrinking welfare rolls on the one hand, and into the swelling dungeons of the
> carceral castle on the other" (Wacquant 209: 294). This is particularly true as
> increasingly young people are caught in the punishing circuits of surveillance,
> containment, repression, and **disposability**. As a result of what can be called
> the war on youth, young people no longer are seen as part of the social contract
> and appear to have been banished from everyday social investment,
> imagination, and future that once characterized the American dream. (Giroux,
> *Disposable Youth,* 2012: 3).

I agree with Giroux's evaluation of society's, (I include the Black church),

callous and unconcerned attitude toward our Black youth. It is for this reason that I feel

that it is imperative for the Black church to intentionally seek to reach out to our Black

youth to find ways to reconnect them back to a love for Christ, along with the Black

church. Giroux points out, "The relations between youth and adults have always been

marked by strained generational and ideological struggles, but the new economic and

social conditions that youth face today, along with a callous indifference to their

spiritual and material needs, suggest a qualitatively different attitude on the part of

many adults toward American youth—one that indicates that the young have become

our lowest national priority," (Giroux 2012, xiv). Arzola and his associates state,

"When the youth ministry lights go dim and the faith journey is no longer

programmatically handed to them, they are left on their own," (Arzola et al. 2015, 76).

Method and Methodology

As indicated earlier, I employed a qualitative research method which involved the use of participant observations, a focus group, followed by a theatrical activity. With the use of starter questions, the participants were encouraged to engage in frank, open dialogue with each other. Dorothy C. Bass in her book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, implies that all humanity is connected one to the other. We need to interact and share our stories in order to build up our faith life because our destinies are intertwined. "Lacking shared beliefs, we conclude that our private preferences are the closest we can come to the truth of matters. […]. The fact is that inward journeys are not enough to meet our need. Our lives are tangled up with everyone else's in ways beyond our knowing, 'caught,' as Martin Luther King Jr, put it, 'in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny," (Bass 1997, 4). It is for this very reason that I am implementing the use of an ethnographic methodology.

I was also guided by Osmer's definition that, "Qualitative research seeks to understand the actions and practices in which individuals and groups engage in everyday life and the meanings they ascribe to their experience. […]. Qualitative research is better suited to studying a small number of individuals, groups, or communities in depth," (Osmer, *Practical Theology* 2008, 49-50), and it is for this very reason I feel that this method will be better suited to be the foundational implementation method for my project. From this intentional dialogue using ethnographic/narrative research tactics, it was hoped that each person would begin to reflect on memoirs and

mirrors that have served to shape and influence their perception of the Black church and how they perceive their relationship, or lack of, with Christ. From these insightful monologues, interactions, and verbal exchanges, I hoped to receive more insight into the problem of the disconnect that rages through Black congregations in relationship to our Black youth and young adults and their relationship with God and the Black church. These insights came forth by using the theatrical method of improvisation in a play. Through the use of this theatrical method, the members of the focus group, especially the youth and young adults, could be their authentic selves and speak from their hearts. The play allowed them to act out the pain and feelings of disconnect in a way that invoked an outpouring of empathy on the part of the audience.

Significance of the Study

I chose a very eclectic group of individuals because I believed that each one would bring an insightful, unique perspective to the problem of trying to create a church without walls that would serve to help repair the disconnect that plagues the Black church in respect to our youth and young adults and help to formulate ideas for ministries that will promote their sense of belonging, and a sense of ownership in the hearts and minds of their peers. Through the implementation of ethnographic methodology, these individuals were encouraged to engage in unfiltered dialogue within the group, reflecting on personal memoirs and mirrors that have affected the choices they have made concerning their religious journey.

I hypothesized that if this project was not carried out, the Black youth and young adults in the church would continue to feel disconnected and disengaged from the

religious tradition of their ancestors and continue to decline mentally, spiritually, and socially in connection to their relationship with God, the Black church, and their community. I also hypothesized that if we as Black church leaders continued to talk *at* the Black youth and young adults instead of talking *to* them, giving them an intentional opportunity to respond with their authentic voice then we ran the risk of them leaving the congregation and, eventually, the faith.

Project Objective

According to editor Dwight N. Hopkins, in the book *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, "One of the major methodological linchpins of black theology has been this quest for the equality of all persons under God. Indeed, ethicist Peter Paris calls this the fundamental principle of the black Christian tradition in which human equality under God is understood as categorical, absolute, unconditional, and universally applicable," (Hopkins 1999, 109). With this being said, somewhere along the way, the Black Church *progressively* neglected to apply this *principle* to the intentional inclusion of our Black youth and young adults resulting in growing feelings of disconnect and deliberate exclusion in the hearts of our Black youth and young adults towards the Black Church.

To carry out an opportunity to explore the views of youth and young adults, a project activity was formed. The name of the activity was The Summer Theater Project: Giving Voice to the Voiceless. As stated in the Introduction, the play allowed the youth and young adults to speak without fear of judgement by those they were trying to reach

because they were acting out fictitious roles that represented real life realities. They were not speaking directly to any person, yet each person present was able to place themselves within the situations portrayed and truly hear and understand the heart-songs of the those seeking to be heard.

My objective was to glean knowledge from intentionally listening to these individuals that would result in creating ministries that would be productive in helping to bridge the gap that has fostered feelings of disconnect, disenfranchisement, and abandonment by the religion of their forefathers and mothers in the hearts and minds of our Black youth and young adults.

My objective was to find out from this eclectic group what are some of the common issues that are shared among our youth and young adults, especially our Black youth and young adults, concerning the Black church, and, hopefully, identify common problems with a universal solution. By doing so, I hope to be able to formulate some possible answers that will have the ability, if implemented within the congregation, to lead to a positive rectification of the afore expressed problem.

Project Goal

The short-range goal is to initiate the conversation between our Black youth and young adults, and the leaders of the Black church. The mid-range goal is to allow the conversation to blossom into a more open, unadulterated, effective recourse between Black youth and young adults, and youth leaders, as well as those in positions of authority who have the power to institute and establish meaningful, effective

youth/young adult outreach ministries within and without the congregation and community.

Finally, my long-range goal is to come up with possible solutions that can be implemented in local Black churches as a part of their normal church curriculum that will result in reconnecting those youth/young adults, reigniting their passion to be in relationship with Jesus and the Black church. Janella Rea exclaimed in her Master's dissertation, "Young Adults Ministry: Challenge to Faith Formation and Leadership,

> Young Adults have gifts to offer the Church. Along with their youth, they bring enthusiasm, hope, and the desire to serve the Church. Many young adults have a hunger to search for meaning in their lives. They commit themselves to service as they value the need to respond to the care of the poor and vulnerable. Others are seeking opportunities to grow in their faith as young adults to be connected in a community among peers, who share their joys, as well as struggles, of living as a Christian in a society that is captivated by consumerism. (Rea 2013, 2)

I hope that by the end of this project, I will have helped to instill this perspective into the hearts of the participants, as well as the church leadership and congregants. I believe that if we (the Black church leaders and educators) continue to turn a deaf ear to the cries of our Black youth and young adults within the Black church, the traditional Black church of our forefathers and mothers will cease to exist as we know it, resulting in the lose of an entire generation of Black youth and young adults. We will also fail in our duty to be the light of our communities and the world as positive change-agents for God. Rea went on to say, "When young adults are well guided they have the creativity and enthusiasm to transform society," (Rea 2013, 3), and it is our responsibility as the Black church to cultivate that transforming power in our Black youth and young adults.

Limitations of the Study

The positive side of this project is that it allows the youth and young adults involved in this exercise an opportunity to engage in productive conversation over issues that interest them without feeling muzzled by tradition and religiosity, but because it is focused on a very small congregation located in a small rural town, it may not be a true reflection of the experiences of inner city Black youth/young adults or those living in larger more urban congregations with more active, more liberal, thriving youth/young adult ministries.

Also, although the Caucasian members of the group have frequent interaction with other Black youth and young adults, their respective congregations may not be open to incorporating a Black-based model for reconnecting disconnected youth/young adults into their predominately Caucasian religious educational curriculum.

<center>**Chapter 1**</center>

<center>**Discerning the Nature and Challenges of Ministry**</center>

Literature Review

In the following sections, I will reflect on developmental theory, learning theory, and critical race theory and their relationship to our Black youth and young adult's apparent feelings of disconnect, and disenfranchisement to the Black church. I will also introduce literary scholars such as Richard R. Osmer and his in-depth reflections on practical theology, James H. Cone, and Gayraud S Wilmore referring to their definition of liberation theology, along with others, and their responses based on these theoretical ideologies in connection to the topic at hand, focusing on practical, as well as liberation theology as the basis of my emphasis. Both promote an environment that gives voice to the voiceless Black youth and young adults through the use of attentive, intentional listening by Black religious leaders and congregations, open conversation, and the freedom to be their authentic selves through the sharing of their personal experiences in relationship to the Black church and their faith journeys.

Practical Theology

Richard R. Osmer in his book, *Practical Theology: An Introduction,* describes theology as exploring four questions that help us interpret and respond to specific circumstances. He frames the questions and their meanings as follows:

<center>31</center>

Over the course of this book we explore four questions that can guide our interpretation and response to situations of this sort: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? Answering each of these questions is the focus of one of the four core tasks of practical theological interpretation: The descriptive-empirical task. Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. The interpretive task. Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. The normative task. Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice." The pragmatic task. Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the "talk back" emerging when they are enacted. Together, these four tasks constitute the basic structure of practical theological interpretation. (Osmer 2008, p. 4)

From Osmer's perspective, it may be said that practical theology promotes the practice of listening to the listener in an effort to glean information that will lead to a positive, productive solution to the problem of reconnecting our disconnected Black youth and young adults.

Liberation Theology

James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore in their writing, *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume Two: 1980-1992*, explains liberation theory in the following manner,

The struggle, according to black power philosophy, necessarily continues because the oppressed cannot fail to struggle for their liberation. Moreover, black power philosophy's first principle is marked by a concurrent principle of faith which is the conviction that "the cause" of liberation will eventually triumph over the structures of oppression, that, in more familiar words, "we shall overcome." The theological point---that there will be struggle against oppression by God—is the first principle of liberation theology. Latin American liberation theology holds that God strives to set the captives free, that God is "the liberator" of the poor and the oppressed. Clearly, African-American theology is also a liberation theology. (Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology* 1993, 49)

Prophetic Discernment

Theologian John McArthur in his blog *Grace to You: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time* defines prophetic discernment as follows: "In its simplest definition, discernment is nothing more than the ability to decide between truth and error, right and wrong. Discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. […], the ability to think with discernment is synonymous with an ability to think biblically," (McArthur 2018).

In light of McArthur's definition, I concur with the theology of Cone and Wilmore which infers that the deliberate oppression and disregard for our Black youth and young adults by the Black leaders of the Black church are in direct contradiction to God's plan and purpose for the church. The church is to be a liberator for those who are oppressed, to give voice to the voiceless, and to set free those who are in bondage as is reflected in the Holy Scriptures.

Biblical Reflections

Jesus told the multitudes in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls," (KJV). In Lawrence O. Richards' book, *The Bible Readers Companion: Your Guide to Every Chapter of the Bible,* states, "The 'wise and learned' insists on standing in judgment on all they hear. But little children simply respond to an adult's word. We need to approach Scripture like little ones, ready to hear and obey," (Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion* 1991, 613).

If we are to restore our Black youth and young adults back to the Black church, we must allow our youth and young adults to worship and work for the Lord per their youthful understanding of Christ, also, adults must approach Christ with a childlike love and obedience as well. Richards explains, "A yoke was a wooden frame that fit over the shoulders of draft animals, harnessing them to each other and to the plow they pulled together. Being yoked to Christ means to rely on Him, to give Him our burdens, and to accept the necessity of walking with Him side by side," (Richard, *The Bible Readers Companion* 1991*,* 613). This must be reflected in the relationship between the church and the congregation in our efforts to restore our Black youth and young adults back to the fold.

The Bible goes on to say in Romans 12:1-2 in the words of Apostle Paul, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God," (*KJV*). John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, the general editors of, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, explains, "The Greek verb translated 'transformed' (metamorphousthe) is seen in the English work 'metamorphosis,' a total change from inside out (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). The key to this change is the 'mind' (noos), the control center of one's attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and actions (cf. Eph. 4:22-23). As one's mind keeps on being made new by the spiritual input of God's Word, prayer, and Christian fellowship, his lifestyle keeps on being transformed," (Walvoord and Zuck,

The Bible Knowledge Commentary 1984*,* 487).

Experts in this field of study seem to infer that this is very much needed in the quest to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults.   Editor Chap Clark in his book, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views,* states, "The rise of the 'Nones in United States census data confirms what popular culture has been telling us for several years: that to many of our neighbors, we as a 'religious bloc' are at core culturally backward, ignorant, bigoted, and far more concerned with our own agenda and self-protection than we are with even the basic tenets of Jesus. Adding to this societal stereotype, young adults and adolescents are leaving our ranks, and those who still express some level of faith have been described by researchers as having such a shallow understanding of their faith that, as a group, they are 'moralistic therapeutic deists,'" (Clark, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century* 2015*,* xiii).

In Hosea 4:6, God, speaking through the lips of the prophet Hosea declares, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou has forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children," (*KJV*). Richards explains, "These religious leaders who had not been called or sanctified by God not surprisingly 'ignored the law of your God' (v. 6). Spiritual leadership is not to be sought lightly. Leaders must be called and ordained by God." (Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion* 1991*,*526).

Experts infer that the positive reconnection of our youth and young adults to the faith must be initiated by leaders who are striving for positive moral results. Dr. Tony

Baron in his book, *The Art of Servant Leadership* states, "The point is that servant leaders must provide an environment to stimulate a different kind of thinking that is healthy and whole for the person. He or she must inspire the willingness to change, despite the cost, so the individual can live out their life fully alive," (Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership* 2010*,* 11-12).

Per Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book entitled *Toxic Faith: Experiencing Healing from Painful Spiritual Abuse,* "Faith is slowly poisoned as lies and false ideas are integrated into a person's beliefs about God. For some, this occurs after a major disappointment in adult life. The faith of others is distorted from early years, by watching parents practice a faith with little truth and hope," (Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith* 2001*,* 33).

Theological Reflections

Baron states, "Servant leadership, on the other hand, is power applied with a moral imperative. That imperative is to lead *sacrificially for the sake of others.* The truly great leaders in the world understand that you become more influential when you give your own power away. Great leaders model, equip, inspire, and encourage others toward individual and community greatness," (Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership* 2010*,* 9). Theologically, this concept is reflected in Matthew 16:24-25, "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it," (*KJV*). In his theological interpretation of this text Walvoord and Zuck explain,

In the Roman Empire, a convicted criminal, when taken to the be crucified, was forced to carry his own cross. This showed publicly that he was then under and submissive to the rule he had been opposing. Likewise, Jesus' disciples must demonstrate their submission to the One against whom they had rebelled. The path Jesus and His follower would travel would be a road of sorrow and suffering. But in so losing one's life, one would truly find a better life. (Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* 1984, 59).

In relation to the problem facing the Black church seeking to repair the disconnect between the church and our Black youth and young adults, the leaders of the church must be willing to humble themselves acknowledging that what we have been doing is not working. We must be willing to listen to the voices of our Black youth and young adults, be open to change and new ways of doing 'church' that intentionally seeks to include our Black youth and young adults in the process, and have the courage to implement those changes in the face of opposition from the traditionalist within the congregation. This will involve sacrifice, suffering, and sorrow on the part of those who traditionally lean in the direction of those who wish to silence anything or anyone that contradicts maintaining the status qua.

Prophetic Reflection

One prophetic voice crying in the wilderness of American social, political, economic, and educational inequality among Black youth and young adults is that of Cornel West in his book *Race Matters*. West believes, "The tragic plight of our children clearly reveals our deep disregard for public well-being. About one out of every five children in this country lives in poverty, including one out of every two black children and two out of every five Hispanic children. Most of our children—neglected by overburdened parents and bombarded by the market values of profit-hungry

corporations—are ill-equipped to live lives of spiritual and cultural quality," (West, *Race Matters* 2001*,* 12).

Cheryl J. Sanders in her book*, Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth, and the Poor*, states, , "The ultimate objective of this study is to empower the church to embrace a fresh anointing to overcome evil, with good by bringing evangelical faith and fervor into harness with an ethic of equality and justice for all, so that the ministry, mission and message of Christ can emerge into the third millennium with renewed authority and impact," (Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins* 1997*,* 14),

Sanders also states, "To analyze with honesty and integrity the interplay of race, sex, class and power in church and society remains one of the most pressing prophetic tasks to be undertaken by American Christians at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The theological, ethical and political concerns expressed thus far converge on one question: What relevance does the gospel of Jesus Christ have for women, children and the poor in society where affluent white males have typically held control of goods, services and social policy," (Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins* 1997*,* 14).

Christopher A. Mallett explores this disconnecting phenomenon in his book *The School-to-Prison Pipeline*. Mallet explains, "Here, the link and risk factors are presented, with a prima facia conclusion that maltreatment is at minimum a strong correlative thread for many students both into and through the pipeline. As reviewed earlier, maltreatment and related traumas have profound impacts on many child and adolescent school outcomes. The more serious, earlier in life, or pervasive the

maltreatment, the greater the risk for special education disabilities," (Mallet, *The School-to-Prison Pipeline* 2016, 91)

Mallett implies that these policies have stripped our youth of a sense of hope in a future in which they can strive and be successful, productive, free American citizens. Mallett states,

> For almost all children and adolescents, schools remain the safest environment. With very low rates of violent crime that occur on school grounds, (although I am sure that in the past 4 years, those rates have risen with all the school shootings that have occurred just in this decade) and the positive impact that nurturing and well-structured school setting provides, most students have opportunities that should allow for strong learning outcomes and social supports, […]. However, when positive structures and supports are lacking or when security measures and distrust increase throughout schools, many students are harmed, which results in poorer academic outcomes, strained social bonds with teachers and administrators, and increased risk for school failure (Sojoyner, 2014; Steeves & Marx, 2014). (Mallett, *The School-to-Prison Pipeline* 2016, 19)

Giroux his book, *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty,* so elegantly states, "We need to liberate the discourse and spaces of freedom from the plague of consumer narcissism and casino capitalism. We need to engage the struggle to restore and build those public spaces where democratic ideals, visions, and social relations can be nurtured and developed as a part of a genuinely meaningful education and politics," (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012, 8).

Social, Ethical, Psychological Discernment

The following paragraphs will reflect on developmental, stage, and critical theory based on experts in the field of youth and young adult psychology and ministry, as well as, how economical influences affect Black youth and young adults.

Developmental Theory

Developmental theory covers four central themes: nature-vs-nurture, stage theories, critical or sensitive period, and adolescent experiences effects on future growth. Nature verses nurture deals with the effects of genetic makeup in their life choices in response to their environment. The definition given by the website Encyclopedia.com states, "Specifically, developmentalist want to know the contribution of genetic or maturational influences on development as well as the role played by environmental experiences," (Encyclopedia.com 2002).

Henry A. Giroux makes the statement that, "While youth have always represented an ambiguous category, young people are under assault today in ways that are entirely new because they now face a world that is far more dangerous than at any other time in recent history. As Jean-Marie Durand points out, "When war and the criminalization of social problems become a mode of governance 'Youth is no longer considered the world's future but as a threat to its present,'" (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012, 4).

I included Christopher A. Mallett as a source because he spends a great deal of time addressing the effect of insufficient education connecting it to the decay and increased incarceration of our Black youth and young adults. Mallett explains, "Children at risk for academic failure in elementary school often have unidentified learning problems; those who fail are at increased risk for later offending behaviors (Hawkins et al., 2000). It is speculated that adolescents with unidentified learning disabilities are disproportionately represented among those who are suspended,

expelled, and/or drop out of high school (Keleher, 2000). These out-of-school outcomes are risk factors for delinquent and criminal activities, often serious offending (Advancement Project, 2005; Sum, Khatwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009)," (Mallet, *The School -to-Prison Pipeline* 2016*,* 49).

Giroux, states, "[…], young people today become an excess burden and are handed over to the marketing experts and the advocates of privatization and commodification. They attend schools that treat them like robots or criminals, while the most creative and brilliant teachers are deskilled, reduced to either technicians or cheerleaders for the billionaires' educational reform efforts. Young people are no longer a group to be nurtured, but a new market waiting to be mined for profits or an army used to fight immoral wars," (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012*,* 22).

Understanding these facts concerning societies view of Black youth and young adults will serve to help youth and young adult leaders in their efforts to relate to the sense of disconnect and disenfranchisement felt by them. It will also help to formulate ministries that will break through the ideology of nothingness and disconnect embraced by the none generation. James Emery White in his book*, The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated,* explains, "But it's more than simply being nothing. Perhaps one of the more disconcerting marks of typical *Nones* is that they are very content with holding their 'nothing in particular' stance toward religion. Among those who say they believe in 'nothing in particular,' 88 percent are not even looking for a specific faith or religion," (White, *The Rise of the Nones* 2014*,* 26).

Stage Theory

Stage theory explores the theory of youth growth or development based on progressive life stages. "Stage theories, such as those proposed by Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Sigmund Freud, contend that development progresses through maturationally determined stages. While this perspective underscores the contributions of both biology and the environment, a greater emphasis is placed on a maturationally predetermined progression through a fixed developmental sequence," (Encyclopedia.com, 2002). In other words, some aspects of youth growth and development are unchangeable due to predetermined natural markers within human development and should be taken into consideration by Black church leaders in dealing with our Black youth and young adults.

The following expert seems to *somewhat* disagree with that analogy of Peter Paris in his book *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, states, "One of the primary functions of parents, teachers, and various cultural institutions is moral education guiding, training, and nurturing the young in knowing, obeying, and affirming the culture's basic values. Hence, moral education can never take place in relation to a set of normative values" (Paris, *Social Teaching* 1985*,* 57-58).

Erik H. Erikson in his book *Childhood and Society*, explains: "It follows that therapy and guidance by professionals are doomed to failure where the culture refuses to provide an early basis for an identity and where opportunities for appropriate later adjustments are missing," (Erikson, *Childhood* 1950*,* 241). Although this book was written several years ago, the results of his research is still relevant today. Erikson

agrees with the basic definition of stage theory, however, in this statement, he implies that nurturing can override nature if it is implemented at an early age.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is rooted in the social sciences. Critical or sensitive period theory investigates the effects of environmental or biological events on youth development. "A critical or sensitive period is defined as a time of growth during which an organism is maximally responsive to certain environmental or biological events. Critical periods emphasize the interaction of both nature and nurture, with environmental experiences (nurture) activating biologically programmed (nature) developmental changes, or, conversely, enabling an organism to assimilate certain environmental experiences," (Encyclopedia.com 2002).

In reference to critical theory and the Black church, how we interact with our youth and young adults at an early age (between 4 to 12 years of age based on my experience) within the Black church can determine how they connect or engage the church once they are able to decide for themselves to become active, supportive members of the congregation. If as children, they constantly pushed into the shadows to be seen and not heard, to be omitted from having input into the planning of church activities/worship, and financial support, this only promotes a deep sense of disconnect and irrelevance within the hearts and minds of our Black youth and young adults.

Giroux states, "Beneath the abstract codifying of youth around the discourses of law, medicine, psychology, employment, education, and marketing statistics, there is the lived experience of being young. For me, youth invokes a repository of memories

fueled by my own journey through an adult world that largely seemed to be in the way, a world held together by a disciplinary practices and restrictions that appeared at the time more oppressive than liberating," (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012, 9).

Erikson explains, "One should learn from such an example that re-education must seize upon the forces mobilized for playful integration. On the other hand, the desperate intensity of many a symptom must be understood as the defense of step in identity development which to the child promises integration of the rapid changes taking place in all areas of his life. What to the observer looks like an especially powerful manifestation of naked instinct is often only a desperate plea for the permission to synthesize and sublimate in the only way possible," (Erikson, *Childhood* 1950, 240).

To be more effective in employing critical or sensitive period theology, youth and young adult leaders must employ the skills of empirical research. Per Richard Osmer, "It involves attending to others in their particularity and otherness in a systematic and disciplined way. […]. Yet, it is worthwhile for students and leaders to learn the skill of attending to the words and actions of others without filtering them through interpretive and normative judgments. This is very important in the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation, which focuses on what is going on before reflecting on why it is going on or what ought to take place," (Osmer, *Practical Theology* 2008, 58-59).

Adolescent experiences effects on further growth theory asks the question, will childhood experiences and traumas affect future psychological development and ability

to make mental adjustments to changing environments. "Developmental scientist such as Mary Ainsworth, Alan Sroufe, and Freud emphasize the significance of early attachments and emotional conflict in predicting later psychological adjustment. It is argued that early risk factors have a more permanent influence on the course of development than later experiences," (Encyclopedia.com 2002).

Experts in this field of study have implied in their scholarly writings that there have always been dangers lurking in the shadows waiting for the opportunity to consume our youth. In this season of the *time out generation*, along with society's practice of encouraging youth to disregard traditional theological teachings, is now advocating them to seek their own spiritual path. This has resulted in the decay of moral aspirations and disrespect for personal and social boundaries being at an all-time high.

Some statistics seemingly supporting this vein of reasoning is the increased disregard for human life by our Black youth and young adults. Per a 2011 report by the CDC on gun violence in Metropolitan areas,

> Violence-related firearm deaths remain an important public health concern in the United States. During 2006—2007, a total of 25,423 firearm homicides and 34,235 firearm suicides occurred among U.S. residents (1). These national totals include 4,166 firearm homicides and 1,446 firearm suicides among youths age 10—19 years; the rate of firearm homicides among youths slightly exceeded the rate among persons of all ages. (CDC 2011)

This report implies that our Black youth and young adults' disconnect from the Black church, because of its failure to exhibit the Christ-like values of love, respect, and acceptance for all humanity, especially for our Black youth and young adults, seems to

be fueling the increased use of violence by them within society. Per Giroux, they are labeled as a lost cause that is beyond redemption.

> As the social safety net and protections unraveled in the last 30 years, the culture and administrative apparatus of the prison, operating within the narrow registers of punishment and crime management, emerge as a core institution of American society. In part, this is evident in the fact that over seven million people are now under the jurisdiction of some element of the criminal justice system. [….]. Instead of being viewed as impoverished, minority youth are seen as lazy and shiftless; instead of being understood in terms of how badly they are served by failing schools, many poor minority youths are labeled as uneducable and pushed out of education or even worse. (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012*, 5*)

The Black church seems to have taken on the same attitude as society in regard to our disconnected Black youth and young adults. Because of this apparent mindset, the church has been negligent in its attempts to reach out, listen to, and deliberately include our Black youth and young adults in the process of ministry development that seeks to speak to the needs and concerns of this 21st Century generation, thus, perpetuating the continued decline in Black youth and young adult membership within the Black church.

Economical Influences

Per Cornel West in his book *Race Matters*, "Wealth inequality (the top 1 percent have wealth equivalent to the bottom 95 percent, or 48 percent of the financial net wealth in the country!) tips the balance against fair opportunity in education, employment, and other crucial life-chances. Corporate power--with its plutocratic, patriarchal, and pigmentocratic realities--lessens the abilities of citizens and workers to have a meaningful voice in shaping their destiny. Police power--disproportionately used against poor communities of color--requires just and fair regulation if it is not to

be viewed as illegitimate and arbitrary," (West, 2001, xvi). These inequalities and social economical, and political injustices highlighted by West are some of the issues that are fueling the Black Lives Matter Movement that has spread throughout the land. Many of our Black youth and young adults blame the apparent apathy and silence on the part of senior Black civil rights and church leaders as a sign of weakness and passive support of these injustices further justifying the Millennials rejection of mainstream religion.

Giroux states, "For many poor white youth and youth of color today, the notion of solidarity and the sense of dependence and respect that marked my childhood are gone. Instead, America is waging not only an immoral and unjust war abroad in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also a more insidious, high-intensity war at home against any viable notion of the social. […]. For many young people, today, the possibility of a better future has vanished, as one in seven Americans lives in poverty and over fifty million are deprived of health insurance," (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 2012, 17).

Operational Discernment: Good Practices

When addressing the problem of our disconnected Black youth and young adults from the Black church and how to correct it, we must employ operational discernment or examine the issues that the Black church is confronting in relationship to our Black youth and young adults, and what programs or solutions have been implemented by those who are considered experts in the field of youth and young adult ministry. The following paragraphs will address some of the issues that confront our Black youth and young adults including (but not limited to) social and sexual

orientation among Black youth and young adults and the church's response to these issues based on the studies conducted by expert researchers within the field of youth and young adult ministry.

Social and Sexual Orientation Influences

Per Anne E. Streatly Wimberly, Sandra L. Barnes, along with Karma D. Johnson in their book *Youth Ministry in the Black Church: Centered in Hope*, the writers' state,

> Leaders, parents, and youth alike who participated in the national study [Vision Quest Study] made clear that people who take on and carry out ministry with youth must have some particular qualities and know-how. First excellent leaders have a ministry that is up close and personal. We connect directly with youth and others by bringing our whole selves into ministry. The result is privileged relationships with youth and others connected with the ministry that requires us to know who and whose we are and what gifts we bring into the leadership role. (Wimberly et al. 2013, 4)

If the Black church expects to be successful in reconnecting our disconnected Black youth and young adults, as has been implied by the previous statement, church and youth leaders must first have a passion for God, for youth ministry, and authentic love for them in order to reach our youth and young adults. Also, youth ministers and leaders must be acutely aware of their gifts and abilities that they are bringing to the table in order to implement successful youth and young adult ministries.

Anthony Stanford addresses these issues facing LGBT youth and young adults and more in his narrative *Homophobia in the Black Church: How Faith Politics, and Fear Divide the Black Community*. In Stanford's summary of the purpose of the book, he explains,

> *Homophobia in the Black Church* lays bare the long, drawn-out struggle between the Black Church and the black Christian LGBTS. It lifts the veil on the secretive and vicious homophobic black culture that punishes and exiles many black homosexuals to live their lives in the shadows. Going further, it examines the ways that black Christian LGBTs, who are often already victims of their families and communities, are scorned by black religious leaders and made to suffer what is tantamount to a social crucifixion that some believe was amplified by competition for federal funding. (Stanford 2013, xv)

The reference Stanford makes to the influence of federal funding upon the discrimination towards the LGBT community is about the faith-based funding initiative that was designed and instituted during the Bush administrations. In Stanford's opinion, "It is also what prompted some to believe that the competition for faith-based funding, and the expectation of ongoing federal financial support, had helped to encourage a campaign of animosity against black Christian LGBTs. The possibility that faith-based funding had facilitated and amplified discrimination against black homosexuals, by an already unsympathetic black community, seems entirely plausible," (Stanford 2013, xv).

Community Response

There are many organizations and churches that have put in place programs. Their purpose is to create spaces conducive to encouraging a feeling of inclusion and freedom to commune with God for our youth and young adults, free of the traditional restraints forced upon them by those boxed in by their own preconceived ideas of what is 'acceptable worship'.

One such method is the creation of conferences that are designed to promote free worship and expression on the part of our Black youth and young adults such as the Re-Connect Actionfest 2016 National Conference sponsored by the Youth Hope-

Builders Academy of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

It was held at the Impact Church on February 26-27, 2016, which is one of the fastest

growing congregations in the United Methodist Church.

The focus of this church, as well as the conference was to promote a church in

action that goes beyond the walls of tradition and church as usual. The Re-Connect

Actionfest 2016 Conference was comprised of youth and young adult leaders, pastors,

and Christian educators from all around the country coming together to worship, praise,

and dialogue about their theologies, ideas, and desires for the church and their quest to

be all that they can be in Christ with and on behalf of youth,

(www.youthhopebuilders.com/conference)

Experts in the field of youth and young adult outreach ministry believe that it is

paramount that Black church leaders must be willing to think creatively and be ready

and willing to use whatever technology is at their disposal. According to Anne E.

Streatly Wimberly and her associates, "Making tech connections requires wise choices-

choices about what to use, where to use it, and how much to use, whether it is in church

worship, church outreach, or youth group activities. Responses from youth ministry

leaders in the Vision Quest study tell us that much is yet to be done in making tech

connections with youth,"(Wimberly et al. 2013, 135). If the Black church and its

leaders hope to reach and gain the interest of this Millennial and post Millennial

generation, it must be willing to invest in technological advances such as large screen

monitors in the sanctuary, live streaming of services to those who are more comfortable

with online programming, as well as the newest programs for electronic and online

giving.

What Role Should the Church Play

If the Black church hopes to reconnect our Black youth and young adults to the Black church, it must first know who they are and what their purpose and responsibility is to our Black youth and young adults as well as to the community.

What is the Black Church.

Kerri Day explains, "The Black Church is a community and institution that possesses multiple traditions, textures, and expressions. […]. Drawing upon Victor Anderson and Marla Frederick, I describe the Black Church as a community of transcendence," (Day, *Unfinished Business,*16). James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore in their book, *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume One: 1966-1979,* defines the Black church in this manner; "The Church is that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man," (Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology Vol I* 1993*,* 67).

Twenty-four years ago, Cone and Wilmore made the following statement concerning the role of the church within the Black community and the increasing disconnect between the two which is still conveyed by experts when dealing with the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected youth and young adults to the Black church. Cone and Wilmore stated in *Black Theology: Volume II,*

> Is the Black church one with the Black community? The answer to this question, plain and simple, is, "Not anymore." Consequently, not only must Black theology return to the Black Church, but also the Black Church must return to the African-American community. Black theology requires that the Black Church must do more than be committed to the poor or provide service to the community. The Black Church must once again become one with the

poor and one with the community. Not long ago, one could claim with relative confidence that there was no gap between the Black Church and the African-American community and that, indeed, they were one. Quiet as it is kept, this identity between the Black Church and the African-American community is now probably more myth than reality. The Black Church and the African-American community are not identical, and the gap between them is growing wider every day. (Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology Volume II* 1993*, 135)

Implications for the Research

As this study proceeded, the question was asked: What are the implications for the review of literature for the study on those who have been silenced by the rigid traditions that dominate the Black church? How may the work of others inform what is done in this project to help allieviate those barriers that have served as walls of disconnect between Black youth and young adults and the Black church? The following paragraphs will attempt to answer these questions, as well as, the 'why' of the list of experts in the field of youth and young adult ministry and psychology I have chosen to engage to address the problem of how to reconnect the disconnect between Black youth and young adults and the Black church.

For Those Suffering in Silence

This study included the voices of the silent sufferers of the Black youth and young adult community within the Black church who are members of the LGBT community. In most Black congregations, these individuals are labeled as sinful abominations in the eyes of God and by those who count themselves among the *community of the saints*.

Based on the literature review, it is possible to frame some specific questions. Theologically, how do our Black youth define God? What words do they use in their

God-talk? Psychologically, what is their mental state of mind when dealing with the feelings of diminished self-awareness and self-worth when it comes to their relationship with God and their congregation? Many of the writers, such as Anne Wimberly, Henry Giroux, E. Douglas Powe, Jr., Dean Borgman, Christopher A. Mallett, and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, among others, who are practitioners in youth and young adult minister were very helpful in understanding the disconnect that lead to afore mentioned questions, and formulating possible solutions to the issues at hand.

The review has given shape to my focus on influences that Black youth must deal with on a day to day bases while seeking to maintain a sense of belonging to a community that sees them as non-persons, someone to be seen and not heard, someone to be brought out and paraded before cheering spectators on special days and holidays then put back on the shelf of life until the next special occasion.

In a world driven by the almighty dollar, how do our Black youth strive for economic success, while maintaining a sense of integrity and spiritual truth and loyalty to God as they understand God to be?

The Importance of My Theory Choices for This Project

Reflection on critical race theory, as well as learning theory is important to my project in my pursuit of addressing the problem of how to create churches without walls that serve to help reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults to the church and Christ because Jesus constantly focuses on the importance of learning and renewing our minds. Sadly, but true, how society sees and interacts with us as a people, and as an ethnicity affects how we perceive our self-worth, and how we measure our

self-worth will affect our faith in God's ability to love and use us in the work of the Kingdom of God.

Stage theory under-girds my argument that youth and even, young adult's emotional development is closely influenced by both biological, as well as environmental sources which, in turn will influence or serve as a guide for their future spiritual growth and interaction with God and the Church.

Why I Used These Sources

Peter Paris' and Erik H. Erikson's in-depth academic research into the biological, as well as the environmental effects on the future spiritual growth and welfare of youth and young adults is why I felt it was important to include their work as a part of my literary foundation.

Cornel West's prolific insight into the plight of the African American community is invaluable and I would be remiss not to include his valuable words of wisdom in my study of our disconnected youth and young adults. Although his book *Race Matters* was published in 2001, its insight is still relevant today especially in our present climate of unrest and racial discrimination by the authorities.

In order to achieve my goal of shining more light on the plight of our disconnected Black youth, I will glean from the prolific works of "Erikson's Psycho-social Stages Summary Chart, Empowering Black Youth of Promise" by Sandra L. Barnes and Ann Streaty Wimberly, Chap Clark's *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century, Five Views (Youth, Family, and Culture), Disposable Youth, Racialized Memories, and*

the Culture of Cruelty (Framing 21st Century Social Issues), as well as, Richard R.

Osmer's *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.

I also included Cheryl J*., Sanders' Ministry at the Margin: The Prophetic*

Mission of Women, Youth and, the Poor. This is a very soul-stirring book which has the

capacity to motivate the reader to self-examination of their walk with God, as well as,

their place in and motivation for ministry. The book inspires workers in the field of

ministry to be more aware and open to the needs of their congregants and community

inspiring women to be more steadfast; youth to see their importance in God's plan; and

parents to realize how important it is to the whole community that they put forth their

best effort to raise God-fearing children.

These profound pontiffs of theological wisdom help to form and inform an

understanding as to the challenges facing the 21st Century Black church in their quest

to reach a millennial and post-millennial generation that seems to feel disconnected and

disenfranchised from the church of their forefathers.

Along with the afore mentioned works of theological enlightenment,

Christopher A. Mallett's *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive*

Assessment, 1st Edition explores important sociological, as well as, economic

challenges facing Black youth in a biased, racially fueled, systemically corrupt justice

system designed to destroy the very souls of our Black youth and to silence their voices.

As Christians, we are to exhibit and operate under the direction of and within the

restraints of the Fruits of the Spirit which include, but are not limited to, patience,

tolerance, and long-suffering attitudes towards others, especially those who find

themselves pushed to the margins of human society. They should be the guidelines by which the church, as well as our Black communities strive to reconnect with our disconnected youth, but government mandates such as Zero-Tolerance Policies encourage Black Churches to do just the opposite. Christopher Mallett's insightful study into the systemic injustice that negatively impacts the mental, social, emotional, as well as spiritual growth of our Black youth and young adults serves as an invaluable resource for my quest for possible answers to the problem of our disconnected Black youth to the church and to society.

How to reach out to Black youth to rebuild the bridges of understanding, trust, love, and a sense of self-awareness, and coming forward with some plausible plans of action to help reconnect the disconnected lost lambs to the Black church are enlightened by the teachings of Andy Stanley's book, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend, James Emery White's, The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated,* F. Douglas Powe, Jr's book, *New Wine New Wineskines: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations,* along with *Youth Ministry In the Black Church Centered In Hope* by Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Sandra L. Barnes, and Karma D. Johnson.

Having a church that seeks to create an environment that is without social, economic, and social barriers, gender bias, and without discrimination towards those with different views toward sexual orientation is vital in this day of human diversity that permeates all communities including the black community. If we are to reach our disconnected youth in a way that promotes spiritual growth and renewed relationship

with God, we must exhibit unconditional love and Christ-like acceptance of all God's children, great and small.

We must create churches without walls creating welcoming, spiritually nurturing environments that serve to give voice to the voiceless as is implied by the writings of Powe, Jr., White, and Stanford. The literature review provides helpful thoughts about negative attitudes that breed animosity toward differentness and the necessity of connecting with youth where they are and of the leader's important role in assuring excellent ministry.

Today, Black congregations in the United States are struggling to find ways to reconnect our disconnected, disengaged youth and young adults. There appears to be a concerted effort on the part of church leaders and pastors to create a ministry that is welcoming to that generation of people who feel disenfranchised from the church of their ancestors.

Chapter 2

Discerning A Way Forward:

The Methodological Approach

To move forward in the initiative entitled Summer Theater Project: Giving Voice to the Voiceless, it was necessary to utilize a specific methodology that would give direction to the kind of involvement of participants that would assure the goal of giving them voice. The purpose was also to capture the participants' stories, ideas, insights, and learning evolving from their participation.

Particularly with the focus group and the use of theater as a way of communication, I hoped to provide the youth and young adults with a fun creative way of expressing their feelings of disconnect and neglect fostered by the actions and attitudes of the church and those who are in leadership positions. By giving them the freedom to design and have authorship over the play and dialogue, I hoped to enable the youth and young adults to be their authentic selves.

My goal was to give them voice, not that of the preacher, senior congregants, nor that of the youth leaders, but their own voice, their own words, words that could be heard by all that were listening. When youth and young adults are given the freedom and opportunity to be heard, in my experience, they tend to become more proactive in the life of the church. They volunteer more, pay more, attend more, and begin to take

ownership of their church and its potential for growth and success.

This chapter presents in detail the method and methodology used in the project. I will proceed with naming the specific method and methodology, planning strategies, implementation strategies, and evaluation strategies. A final section will conclusively reflect on my initial insights about the processes, outcomes, and the resources recruited to complete my task of outlining the critical need for congregations to give a voice to youth and young adults.

Project Goal

The goal was to help better understand possible causes and solutions of youth and young adults feeling disconnected or experiencing a feeling of apathy on the part of past or current congregations. It was comprised of four weeks of group sessions that culminated at the end of the fourth week with a play that was written and performed in part by those who had participated in the weekly group discussions. The characters were based on each week's focus question and discussion.

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Naming the Method/Methodology

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As previously stated, the youth within my congregation are habitually overlooked and left out of the programming decisions of the church. They are not polled or asked for their input or opinion on what programs they feel will enhance their worship experience nor are their needs considered by the leadership of the church when planning the church calendar for the years events. They are not given a voice in church conference meetings.

As a matter of practice, the parents are encouraged to leave them at home or they are placed in the fellowship hall or sent outside to play when the pastor and senior adult members are discussing anything concerning the present ministries or any (which is seldom) new ministries they may wish to develop. They are not encouraged to feel any sense of ownership or responsibility for the spiritual growth or financial well-being of the church. This form of attitude only perpetuates the youths' sense of disconnect and disenfranchisement. For this reason, a method needed to be incorporated that allowed the youth and young adults or facilitated an opportunity for their voices to be heard. Thus, to achieve this intent, the qualitative method was chosen.

Specifically, according to Richard R. Osmer in his book *Practical Theology: An Introduction,* "Qualitative research seeks to understand the actions and practices in which individuals and groups engage in everyday life and the meanings they ascribe to their experience. […]. Qualitative research is better suited to studying a small number of individuals, groups, or communities in depth," (Osmer 2008, 49-50). It is for this very reason I chose to use it as my method/methodology.

When seeking answers to the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults, I must first seek to understand who our youth and young adults are as a generation, and in the case of the youth and young adults at St. Paul, to address their situation, I needed to get to know them. Before I can adequately create a platform from which they can speak and be heard by the church, I must give space for them to speak to me. I must become the listener of the listener. Methodology refers to how a researcher intends to carry out the narrative emphasis or ethnographic intent. To

this extent, the qualitative method is narrative in orientation. It is ethnographic. Osmer states that, "[Ethnographic research] seeks to develop a 'thick' description of a cultural or social group. Researchers examine the group's observable patterns of behavior, customs, and way of life over an extended period, gathering information through fieldwork. They participate in the life of the group and observe its day-to-day actions," (Osmer 2008, 51).

The use of theater enables the youth and young adults to speak more freely when they are allowed to do it through role-play. Many psychiatrists and child therapists use the method of role-playing when dealing with children who have suffered abuse or some form of traumatic circumstance as in the case of my two grandchildren. They witnessed the cold-blooded murder of their mother first-hand. It has been very difficult for them to talk about it directly; but, they speak volumes at times of play and pretend. They can share their feelings with me and the counselor by pretending or sharing one of their favorite fairy tales or superhero stories as a metaphor for what happened to their mother.

Growing up as a child, we could speak boldly to the congregation through plays we presented to the members of the church. Plays were often used to share the word in a way that made it understandable to the most uninformed individual. It brought the scriptures to life and allowed us to make them relevant to our modern situations. It gave us voice in a time when at any other moment we were to be seen and not heard.

The same ideology applied when I used it to give space and opportunity for artistic-oriented youth to participate in a summer activity when I first implemented the

Summer Theater Project back in the mid 90's and that same concept was applicable to giving voice to the youth and young adults at St. Paul. They could speak their hearts' song to a captive audience without judgement or interruption. They could get their point across without any one person feeling as if they were being singled out as being the object of youth and young adults' frustration. It gave true voice to the voiceless.

In terms of the methodology, I used a small intimate focus group of approximately five to six participants. They met twice a week for four weeks before the actual play. The intent was to give individuals a safe space to speak freely among others of like mind. I sought a rare opportunity to observe the unfiltered interaction between four distinctly different generations seeking to understand and give meaning to a problem that affected them all. The methodology was to assure that there was no sense of pretense or judgement by those participating.

Mary Clark Moschella, professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, in her 2011 article in the *Christian Century* entitled "Deep Listening," states, "A leadership tool that can forge a path through the thicket of resistance and routine is something called 'pastoral ethnography.' Pastoral ethnography is simply a strategy for listening in a disciplined and attentive way to church members and leaders. It's a research process that can enliven theological conversation. It is not a top-down exercise of power, but rather a process of enlisting members as research partners. By taking on the role of researcher, a pastor can better understand what is going on among church members, what is at stake for them and what they value," (Moschella 2011, 128).

By allowing an opportunity for everyone to respectfully speak and listen to each other, we arrived at the conclusion that we are saying the 'same things', however, in different ways. By allowing each person to become listeners to the listeners, (in other words, each one stopped talking *at* each other, but *to* each other and *intentionally listened* to what the other had to say), they realized that they had many similar experiences in common, such as, at some given time, they had all had feelings of disconnect to the Black church. In many cases, these feelings were not based on age or generation gaps, but for whatever the reason may have been, they did not feel welcomed by the congregants or they did not feel that they fit in with the people around them.

Planning Strategies

In the following paragraphs, I will endeavor to explain the planning strategies I employed in implementing my project such as the meeting location, selection of participants, focus group curriculum, and play development.

Location

One of the first things I needed to do was to secure a place for the meetings. When considering the location, I had to take into consideration what space would be most convenient and accessible for the meeting. I also realized that this place had to be a centralized location that was not too far out of the way for all the participants.

Since I did not have a monetary budget, the location had to be one that would be donated freely for my use, and it also had to be a place that would allow for an uninterrupted free flow of intercommunication among the participants. I had the choice of two locations that I felt fit into this description, and they were St. Paul Christian

Methodist Episcopal Church, or/and the Carl Perkins Center for Abused Children conference room. I decided to meet in the fellowship hall at the church, except for the last focus group discussion, which we held in my living-room.

Selection of Participants/Volunteers

As has been mentioned before, I was unable to use the original group of individuals I had selected to participate in the focus group because of varies personal issues and commitments that came up unexpectedly. I learned that in conducting this project, the researcher must be flexible and open to change. By permission of the pastor, I was given the opportunity to make a public appeal to the congregation for volunteers for the focus group. Many people volunteered, but only those who are mentioned in the following paragraphs actually followed through on their commitment. However, in spite of the obstacles I faced in forming the focus group, I was able to achieve the generational demographics needed for a well-rounded view of the problems of disconnect facing our Black congregations.

To address the problem of attitudinal concerns and disconnect, I employed the methodology which involved the use of a focus group. This group consisted of the Director of Christian Education for Saint Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church who is a retired female nurse, the minister of music (a female baby boomer), two other married senior adults (the husband is a member of the House of David which is a non-traditional ultra-orthodox congregation, and the wife is a member of St. Paul), a young adult single mother of eight ranging between the ages of 9 to 25 years of age, one youth age 14, and three children ranging between the ages of 7 to 11 years of age These

individuals joined together to engage in open discussion about some of the various issues confronting the Black Church that may or may not be contributing to the disconnect of our Black youth and young adults. My intent was to draw on personal experiences or situations that they have encountered or have witnessed through the experiences of their family and friends in their interactions with the Black church over their lifetime, including present circumstances.

I needed to recruit volunteers to participate in the group discussions. My desire was to have youth and young adults from all levels of society and different ethnic and denominational backgrounds to be participants in the focus group. I felt that this dynamic would give richer, broader insights and solutions to the problem at hand. I first sought direction from God through prayer. Next, I used the direct approach and asked each person I felt would enhance the discussion face-to-face.

I had approached individuals I believed would bring more diversity of thought, experience, and insight to why our Black youth and young adults feel disconnected from the Black church and society. This belief was based upon these individuals' career and religious experience and activities. Unfortunately, although initially, they had agreed wholeheartedly to participate, their job responsibilities and unexpected obligations forced them to go back on their promise.

This left me in a very precarious situation, but a good researcher does not allow unexpected mishaps to deter them from completing their goal of finding possible answers to the question at hand. So, with that in mind, I pressed forward and with the permission of the Preacher-In-Charge, Steven B. Mayhorn, during our time for church

announcements, I asked the congregation for volunteers to participate in the discussions and to help with other needs that might arise in the process of implementing my project, but even from this second group, I had those who had agreed to be a part of my project systematically, one after another, because of job demands and other unexpected obligations, began to forfeit on their initial commitment to the project, leaving me, once again, to the difficult task of recruiting other individuals in order to accomplish my goal.

Focus Group Purpose and Development

The purpose of the focus group was to generate dialogue based on four weeks of discussion about the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected Black youth/young adults to the Black church. The questions the focus group addressed include: How does the Black church balance spiritualism and materialism with a generation whose focus and goal is based on capitalism? How do we create an environment that promotes a reconnect for Nones to our traditional Black Christian faith? How do we represent a loving, all-inclusive God to a generation of youth who, by society and the traditional Black church, have been written off as disposable commodities, a detriment to democracy, and as less than human? From these discussions, my goal was to produce possible solutions to the problem that can be implemented within the local church and beyond. They were also responsible for co-writing and co-producing, in partnership with myself, a play to help illuminate the problem and possible solutions in such a manner that even the most indifferent congregant would be encouraged to take notice.

In collaboration with the sounding board committee, the focus group would then, present the play as a finale to the project in the style of improvisation based on the characters provided by me, including the discussion information gleaned from the weekly focus group. I chose the style of improvisation which involves the actors employing their gifts and talents spontaneously during the actual performance without the benefit of a written script. I used this theatrical technique because I felt that by doing so, the dialogue would be more authentic in nature and the actors would be able to interject their authentic selves into each character, giving them the gift of using their true voice, thus, the title of the play, *Giving Voice to the Voiceless.*

I established a sounding board committee comprised of Rev. Steven B. Mayhorn, the Preacher-In-Charge at St. Paul C. M. E. Church, Mrs. Shirley Mitchell, the Christian Education Director, Mr. Michael Miller, chief steward, and Dr. Ann Wimberly and Dr. Ed Wimberly, my cohort leaders. These individuals were responsible for providing strategic oversight to help maintain a clear and concise project objective. During the implementation of my project, I met with my sounding board on two occasions to obtain needed insight and materials to successfully complete my goal.

Evaluation Strategies

My initial plan was to create a video journal of the entire process; therefore, each volunteer was required to sign a release form giving me permission to record their image and voice to be used as a teaching tool for future workshops. I was unable to recruit, or compensate a professional video technician, so, I used my youth volunteers to record the entire project. I did not use written documentation for the final evaluation,

but rather, I allowed each individual to discuss what they had gleaned from the experience and, I also observed the audience response to the play as well as the residual effects upon the congregation in the weeks and months that followed after the project was completed which I will reflect upon in the following excerpts.

I encountered many difficulties along the way and had to rewind, reset, and recompute many of my original plans. Because both I and the youth volunteers were limited in our understanding of the video equipment, mistakes were made during the taping of the project and the play, resulting in the footage being unusable, leaving me unable to accomplish my goal of producing a video journal of the process. Through it all, I concluded that even with our best laid plans, we must recognize that our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts.

I agree with Moschella when she implies that as leaders we must be willing to question those things that seem to be hindering the progress of the church and then be committed enough to our vocation as pastors and leaders to seek out the answers to those questions through research and inquiry. Moschella explains, "Pastoral ethnography often starts with a leader (or a group of leaders) posing a simple question. It may be a nagging question, something like 'What's wrong with this church?' A question that is somewhat critical is OK because it is likely to be an honest question. Then the researcher tries to articulate the theology behind the question," (Moschella 2011, 128).

In the end, I discovered that through the use of evaluation techniques employing qualitative research method with the focus on ethnographic reflection, I was enabled to

do what I believed must be done if we are to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults to the Black church. We set out to listen to the voices of our Black youth and young adults, as well as our seasoned saints, and then, based on the information we glean from those conversations, submit our plans and ways to the Holy Spirit in order to produce the results that will give God the glory and give us as pastors and church leaders, clearer, more productive answers to our questions concerning how we can better serve God's church and God's people.

Project Analysis

Using the model of the pastoral guide, along with the qualitative methods such as life history and ethnographic reflections, during the fourth and final week and wrap up of our focus group, I allowed each member present to expound on what they had learned from the conversations and exchange of epistemological insights that were shared by each participant. I also had each person to list possible solutions to the questions that were used as our starting focus for each session, along with other solutions that could potentially be implemented within the local church to address the disconnect of our Black youth and young adults. This activity was an added aspect of evaluation. Some of the problems and solutions that came out of the focus group will be addressed in a later chapter.

Concluding Reflections

I chose to use a small focus group comprised of an eclectic group of individuals ranging in age from 8 to 70 to allow for conversation that would serve to build bridges between all generations represented in my setting. Through this methodology, my

original goal was to give voice to the youth and young adults, but I realized that if change is to come to this congregation, everyone must have listening ears and everyone must have a voice. It is an intergenerational matter. This is another reason why I chose to use theater as a means of facilitating a platform for a more honest and unfiltered line of communication between the Black youth and young adults and the congregation.

Although the project group was small, it covered a wide range of generational ideologies as to why our Black youth and young adults feel disconnected from the Black church. Because the group, despite its small size, had a mixture of many generational voices, the senior congregants listened to children, the children listened to the youth, the youth listened to the young adults, and young adults listened to the elders. It is for this reason I chose to use ethnographic methodology which allowed for each generation to realize that those things that were causing them to feel a sense of disconnect from the church was not exclusive to just their generation, but they all shared similar stories and experiences.

Chapter 3

Finding Answers to the Challenge of Ministry

In the previous chapter, I outlined the method and methodology employed to implement my project. In this chapter, I will endeavor to present fully the outcomes of/or what was discovered as a result of its implementation.

The title of the primary activity in my project "Creating Churches Without Walls" is the Summer Theater Project: Giving Voice to the Voiceless. The origin of the name was from a youth project that I established over twenty years ago within my home county to address the problem of our youth not having other options for summer activities outside of sports. I realized that everyone did not play sports, so I decided to write a play, which evolved into a musical, that could be used as a learning tool and an opportunity for those with theatrical talents and skills to do something fun and productive for the summer. The content of the play appears in the Appendix.

The original Summer Theater Project which I used as a central activity of my Doctor of Ministry Project was ecumenical, multiracial, involving volunteers from different denominations and organizations, including the school system, along with support from the community and businesses. The youth and young adults who participated contributed their talents through the development of the program, from creating costumes, building the sets, to designing the program bills. Not only did we

work on the play, but the program also included excursions, such as picnics in the city park.

Key Discoveries

In approaching ways to confront the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults to the Black church, once again, I was confronted with coming up with something that would catch the attention of our youth and young adults. I sought to give them an opportunity to express their ideas in a way that would make their feelings about the Black church clear and strong to those who would be listening. So, the Summer Theater Project (with a few modifications) became a model activity and seemed to be the perfect way to do just that.

The project resulted in opening the door for more constructive and productive dialogue between the leaders of the church and the youth and young adults. The youth leaders who participated in the focus group and play, in turn, shared what they had gained with the pastor of the church resulting in him being more inclusive with the youth and young adults of the church in worship and leadership positions within the congregation.

On the night of the finale, using theater and song, we reminded those present that the Black church is facing an increased decline in the number of youth and young adults within their congregations. Too many of our youth are being forced into the school-to-prison pipeline by unjust laws, and inadequate school systems, while the church stands silently by. Increasingly, our young adults are suffering spiritual starvation while sitting at the table of our traditional Black churches who refuse to hear

the cries of our youth and young adults to be included and respected as vibrant, essential members of the body of Christ. The Black church refuses to submit their will to the will and authority of the Holy Spirit to be transformed through the renewing of their minds.

My goal was and continues to be to create churches without walls by tearing down the man-made obstacles between the Black church and those voices crying out in the wilderness pleading to be heard. For example, I heard many of the youth and the children that participated in the focus group express feelings of being invisible to and unheard by the members and leaders of their perspective congregations. On the night of the play, the youth and young adults successfully spoke to the congregation through the gift of acting beseeching the church leaders and senior congregants to open their eyes that they might see, open their ears that they might hear as the members of the focus group endeavored to give voice to the voiceless.

The youth and young adults at St. Paul have very few activities that are designed to allow space for them to express and celebrate their relationship with Jesus in their own way. They have no youth or young adult programs specifically designed for them, there is no CYF (Christian Youth Fellowship) department established in the church which would focus on programming and projects for the youth and young adults, they have no voice in the choir, nor is there a desire on the part of those who oversee the music to establish one. In fact, the youth who had bravely volunteered to be a part of the choir were eventually pushed out of the choir by those traditional members who felt that the children were better off being seen and not heard. As indicated in the

introduction, their negative attitudes towards the young only served to push them back into the pews where they became silent once again, (at least the ones that did not disconnect from the congregation all together).

As a part of the preparation process for the focus group discussion, two weeks before implementing the actual project, I decided to ask some of the youth and young adults within the local congregation their opinion concerning the church and its present state of affairs. When asked how they felt about the church and how it is organized, their response was unenthusiastic, and detached. They all agreed that they were bored and felt disconnected from the congregation. The young adults felt overlooked and disregarded by those in leadership. They can serve as ushers and the children are put on display during Sunday school, but they are not allowed to present ideas that allow them to be included in the decision-making process for the programming of the church. From this very eclectic group of individuals, I was able to glean several enlightening ideas as to why the Black Church is facing a continued problem of fewer and fewer Black youth and young adults seeking to connect or reconnect with the traditional Black Church of their forefathers and mothers. The group also provided several possible solutions that could be implemented within the local congregation. More details concerning the actual focus group discussions and outcomes will be revealed later within this chapter.

Theologically, this was a very eclectic group of Christians, however, despite their denominational diversity in biblical teaching, they were all in agreement as to the problems facing the Black Church and what they believed were possible solutions to

those problems. Some of those possible strategies for solving some of those problems causing the disconnect for our Black youth and young adults that emerged from the very intense focus group discussions are listed in the following paragraphs.

A Dialogue with the Literature Review: Impact and Challenges

During the focus group discussions, several pivotal points were addressed by all those who participated which will be addressed in the following bullet paragraphs in connection with literary scholars in the field of youth and young adult ministry. The pastor had been invited to participate in the discussion, but time and prior obligations beyond his control, prevented him from participating.

What Was Learned?

In this section, five insights will be presented. First, the Black Church needs to intentionally seek to communicate with our Black youth and young adults on a level that they can understand. The young adult mother of eight implied that it was for this reason that she found it difficult to find a congregation that accommodated the needs of her and her family. In many cases there were no programs designed for the youth, no use or tolerance for technology for outreach ministry to engage the minds of the young adults allowing them to be heard or to feel intentionally engaged in the ministry of the church.

Everyone that participated in the focus group shared a mirrored experience that left them feeling overlooked and disconnected from their perspective congregations at some point within their Christian experience.   I realized that the disconnect facing our Black youth and young adults is not isolated to just the Christian Methodist Episcopal

Church, but spans through the church universal. Although our stories occurred in different places at different times, they all contained one common thread, feelings of being ostracized, and disenfranchised by their congregations that produced a sense of disconnect which is reflected in the holistic nature, and unity of our applied stories.

According to Dean Borgman, "You are looking, then at youth ministry, life, and theology in terms of three stories as mediated from outside and within: your own story; the story of your culture, family, and friends; and the grand story that shapes your faith and brings you to this study. In youth ministry, you are focusing on the stories of your students shaped by cultural stories and their Creator and Redeemer's story. The grand story (the gospel) you share with young people is an expression of your holistic theology," (Borgman 2013, 62).

As church leaders and teachers, we must use our stories and listen to the stories of our Black youth and young adults as mirrors to help understand the needs of our youth and young adults and to help *them* to understand and gain insight to the challenges they face in their spiritual journey as they relate to the experiences we as leaders have had along our own epistemological struggles with our faith. As pastors, and youth leaders, we must listen to the listeners.

Second, it is also clear that the Black Church needs to intentionally make room for youth and young adults to express their faith according to their understanding and relationship with God. The male teenager from St. Paul admitted that many times he felt left out of the conversation at church as did many of his friends in other congregations. Many times, their needs and ideas were not met and completely

overlooked by those in positions of authority within the church. These feelings of being

ostracized and disenfranchised where shared by the more senior members of the focus

group as well. The statement of Douglas Powe, Jr is applicable:

> It is a new time, but most African American congregations are still practicing a way of doing church that is grounded in a "We Shall Overcome" culture. I am not suggesting that a Civil Rights and Black Consciousness way of doing church is negative. Quite the contrary! This way of doing church has brought us to the crossroads and shaped black reality for decades. The question is, **"How are congregations going to move forward?"** Some congregations will argue we need to stay the course because American culture has not changed that much. I am suggesting a different course of action, one that is informed by the past, but recognizes it is time to rethink some of our assumptions. (Powe, Jr. 2012, 26)

I agree with Powe, Jr, in that this same ideology was unilaterally projected by those

who participated in the focus group. The members all agreed that the if the Black

church is to reach this new generation, they must become more technologically

advanced through the use of Facebook for outreach ministry. Instead of criticizing the

youth and young adults for having their cell phones in service, use them to live stream

the service, or to send texts to their friends about the message as it is being presented

by the pastor.

As the church listens to our Black youth and young adults, we recognize that

this is a new generation. Unlike the Baby Boomers and other past generational groups,

they have the whole world at their fingertips. They have access to more knowledge,

more information, more theological precepts, and insights sitting in their living rooms

than we could gain in years of study. This is a technological generation whose minds

operate at computer speeds. Our traditionally structured, mission-less, stagnant pace of

ministry and worship is boring, and non-challenging for this millennial and post

millennial generation.

According to Powe, Jr, "This means African American congregations have to become missional in new ways that speak to a shifting culture. It is no longer acceptable for congregations to expect the culture to conform to them. African American congregations have to start being more externally focused and reaching out to the culture," (Powe, Jr. 2012, 27).

Third, the Black Church needs to be open to change and new experiences. Several of the participants of the focus group, especially the youth and young adults had lost interest in their respective churches due to the fact that the leaders and congregations were not interested in thinking outside the boxes of their outdated traditional way of conducting ministry. The young adult mother who participated in the focus group stated that she had left several churches in the past simply because there were no ministries designed specifically for the youth and young adults, nor was there any interest in creating ministries that stimulated the minds of her children, or focused on authentic outreach ministry.

It has been my experience in my twenty-seven years of ministry that congregations that are not willing to be changed and transformed to meet the needs of a changing society are destined for destruction. I have known many congregations to cease to exist simply because the members refused to embrace the changing culture and communities in which they abide. Powe, Jr infers that this may be due to the following reason.

> African American congregations are trying to impact the culture using the same assumptions used during the Civil Rights and Black Consciousness generations, but the culture has shifted. African American congregations are trying to be invitational in the same ways they have always been in the past, but the culture has shifted. African American congregations are trying to ignite a flame in individuals in the same way they did during the Civil Rights and Black Consciousness generations, but the culture has shifted. It is time for African American congregations to rethink their assumptions and to reconnect to the shifting culture. (Powe, Jr 2012, 27)

In other words, it is time for the Black church to wake up and recognize that this is a new season that requires it to reassess how they do *church*, listen to the voices of this voiceless generation, and begin the transformation process into a relevant spirit-lead entity that is seeking to meet the needs of our disconnected Black youth and young adults

Fourth, the congregants and religious leaders within the Black Church must be authentic in their worship and ministry. This perception was another common thread that was shared by both old and young alike within the focus group. It was demonstrated by their continued reference to the need for transparency on the part of the pastors and youth leaders. A young teenager implied that many times he felt that those who were worshiping or leading worship appeared not to be sincere and this sentiment was shared by the young adult as well as the senior members of the group.

The youth and young adult participants reminded me that youth (as well as young adults) know when people are being authentic. One of the senior members of the group stated that it is important that our youth see those in leadership positions as living examples of what they teach.   All of the members, especially the teenagers and young adults shared stories of being treated with rude indifference by congregants proclaiming to have *the love of Jesus within their hearts.* Their desire for authenticity within their respective congregations and past religious experiences is one of the main reasons they feel that many of our Black youth and young adults disregard the religious traditions of their forefathers and mothers. Truth in worship and in our service as Christian leaders is mandatory if we are to be successful in our quest to reconnect our disconnected Black youth and young adults.

The findings in the project coincide with the epistemological theological perception appearing in Wimberly, Barnes, and Johnson about the genuineness. They

state that,

> *Genuine.* Being real with young people is critical! Youth respect their leaders when they see that they are authentic Christians, that they "walk the walk and talk the talk." Genuineness connects with respect and sincerity. In practice, leaders are able to raise concerns, invite discussion, give skillful feedback, and manage anger. We stand up for and live by the values we hold. We thwart it when we do not challenge negative attitudes and behaviors of youth or others connected to youth ministry. In the absence of genuineness, youth are quick to label their leaders hypocrites. Genuineness matters! (Wimberly, Barnes, Johnson 2013, 50)

Fifth, the Black Church must allow Black youth and young adults to be their authentic selves without judgement on the part of those who are seasoned saints and church leaders.

Many of the religious leaders that were present were in tears after hearing the voices of the youth and young adults echo the agony in their hearts perpetuated by the continued neglect, disenfranchisement, and disregard they have experienced by the Black church. They were especially moved by the third skit entitled "*It Could Have Been Me*" in which a young adult portrayed a young adult gang-banger whose life is saved simply because he/she decided to stop by a neighborhood party being held by one of the local congregations instead of going to meet up with his/her friends who were killed in a shootout with a rival gang. All of the dialogue was improvisation and the main character was gender neutral to highlight the fact that street violence affects ever youth and young adult regardless of their gender. The Black church must be prepared to empathize with both male and female gang members and troubled youth and young adults.

Wimberly addresses the importance of empathy in her book *Youth Ministry in the Black Church.* She explains,

> With empathy, leaders understand the youths' and others' points of view. The empathetic leader understands what is being said and is "tuned into" others' emotions. We are able to step into a youth's shoes and be open to learning from her or him. We can be ourselves. We don't have to hide our real feelings, but we are able to imagine what it is like for the other person. In fact, when we are ourselves, we can allow the youth or others to be themselves. (Wimberly, et, 2013, 51)

The Impact

As has been mentioned before, at the end of the fourth week, the group presented a theatrical presentation that was comprised of three skits (more details in chapter 4) which had been formulated by those participating in the weekly focus group. The group was only able to have one day of rehearsal due to scheduling conflicts on the parts of many of the participants. Two of the three skits were completely carried out through improvisation, called in short, "improv" in which there was no written script, but, rather, each character invented or ad-libbed their lines in response to what was said by the accompanying actor. Only one of the skits had written dialogue which was a one-character monologue (included in the attachment), and even with that, the lead character had the freedom to freestyle in their presentation.

To add a sense of continuity to the play, for the finale, I was inspired to write a song that was performed by the entire cast. The melody had a Latin, calypso tempo. It is fittingly entitled, "*Giving Voice to the Voiceless.*" The lyrics are as follows:

**GIVING VOICE TO THE
VOICELESS**

Jesus said to the
disciples one
day; let the
children come;
please don't push
them away.
They are crying
out; wanting to
be heard; let the
children come;
for this is the
Word. Giving
voice to the
voiceless; it's
time for the
church to wake
up; and give
voice to the
voiceless; if you
want to be
pleasing to our
Lord.

Music is believed to be the universal language of humanity, so therefore, the song served to give one more final plea to the listening audience to remember to allow the youth and young adults within their congregations the opportunity to be heard and to be included as viable members of the body of Christ as mandated by our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.

Although I did not have the attendance that I had hoped for, still, five local churches representing four denominations (Baptist, C.M.E., Nondenominational, and COGIC) were present for the presentation of the play and all those present appeared to be positively impacted by what they saw and heard. Although Pastor Mayhorn was

neither present for the focus group discussion nor the play, he did receive reports from Mrs. Shirley Mitchell who was a part of my sounding board group as well as a part of the focus group and play. I must assume that he was impacted by what he was told because I noticed in the following weeks, that the pastor and other officers of the church began placing more focus on, as well as becoming more intentional in including the youth and young adults as active participants in the worship experience along with the day-to-day planning of the church's active ministries.

Challenges

I was confronted by several obstacles and challenges during the implementation of my project including, but not limited to inconsistency and unconcern by many of those who had originally made commitments to support and participate in the project; continually having to deal with changing schedules and unforeseen situations; continued technical problems with the video equipment and the lack of competent individuals to operate the equipment.

Unfortunately, people who were vital (but not irreplaceable) to the play canceled at the last minute, so I had to come up with a Plan B. These challenges helped to reinforce my understanding of the importance of flexibility on the part of church/youth leaders when implementing any church project, especially one dealing with our youth and young adults.

As I have previously stated, one of the challenges I faced was that of continued technical difficulties with the video equipment due to the lack of experience on the part of those who had volunteered to help with that part of the project. I had hoped to make

a video journal of the implementation of the project, but because the person operating

the camera was not well versed in the use of the equipment, (nor was I), along with

those who volunteered to do the editing, most of the taping was damaged and

incoherent. I was left with no other choice than to scrap that part of the project. Because

I had little to no budget, I was unable to hire a professional to record the focus group

and the play. This is a lesson learned; when implementing such a project, it would be

wise to recruit a professional rather than rely on the process of volunteering or using a

donor to be responsible for the technical aspects of the project.

Toward A Model for Ministry

As stated earlier, the purpose of using the qualitative research method and

methodology was to gather a small eclectic focus group employing ethnographic

reflections that allowed youth and young adults as well as senior adults participating in

the project, an opportunity to express their previously unspoken feelings concerning the

Black church. Using this form of research, I was able to create a space in which all

present could speak freely and unrestrained about the feelings of disconnect,

disenfranchisement, and disregard each shared and had experienced in the past, as well

as in the present, within their perspective congregations.

The use of the Summer Theater Project as the model for presenting the

participants of the focus groups' concerns and conclusions to the local ministers and

church youth leaders allowed the youth and young adults a voice that could be heard

without condemnation on the part of congregation. Improvisation opened the door for

each person to be their authentic selves and yet present a message that resonated with

majority of the people who attended the final play.

It is a theatrical model which can produce the following results if the pieces of

the project I have presented are carried out. One of the primary aspects of this model

is the freedom allotted the participants to create. By allowing the members of the focus

group to create the dialogue based on their authentic experiences with religious life

gives them the tools to express what they truly feel but have been unable to share with

the leaders of their church due to constant ridicule for questioning the traditions of the

church.

A second aspect of the model is the opportunity for the youth and young adults

(and anyone else who participates) to be their authentic selves. The proposed model

allows for the youth and young adults to speak freely in an environment designed for

open discussion free from condemnation, for everyone who participates are volunteers

who are of like minds. All are seeking to help make the Black church a place that is

welcoming to all congregants, both young and old. The key aspects of the model are

visually represented in figure 1.

**Provide
Youth
Freedom
to Create**

Give Youth Opportunity to be Authentic

**Give opportunity for Leaders to Become listeners**
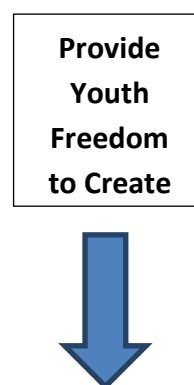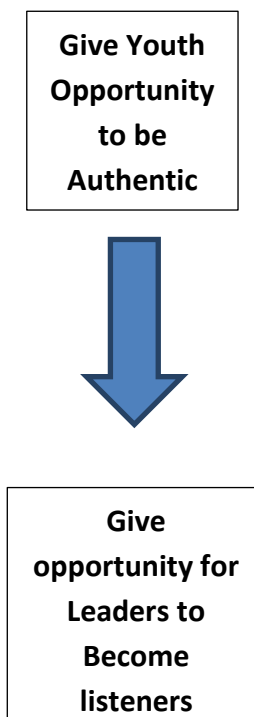
Figure 1. Key Aspects of a Theatrical Model

There are many other aspects that can be gleaned from the model; however, the final one that is of the utmost importance is that it gives the pastor and church leaders an opportunity to become listeners of the listeners. That is, they become co-listeners and not just tellers or lecturers. During the focus groups, the pastor/or church leaders only serve as observers and listeners to the voices of the youth and young adults who will participate in the focus group. The pastor or the youth leaders lay the foundation for the discussion, but they must allow the participants to build upon that foundation using their experiences as the building blocks for the final analysis and solutions to the problem at hand.

As a child growing up in the Black church, theatrical presentations were a common tool used by the youth and young adults to help bring the scriptures to life and to express their understanding of religious theology, as well as, Christian life. Allowing

the youth and young adults to create their own dialogue for the play gives them the opportunity to express what is truly in their hearts and minds. It provides those participating with a captive audience and listening ears which would otherwise be deafened to their cries to be heard.

Chapter 4

Making Ministry Come Alive

Creating churches without walls is more than just a slogan or a catchy phrase.

It is what the universal church must become if it is to be relevant in the 21st Century

and pleasing in the eyes of a loving, unlimited, unrestrained, omnipresent, and

omniscient, all in encompassing God.

As has been stated earlier, one of the reoccurring issues that had arisen from the

focus group discussions was that of the members of the group, at various times, feeling

unwanted and excluded from the Black congregations they were or had, in the past,

attended. What emerged was the importance of the Black church being a place where

love, real love, is nurtured and abounds; where all people, especially our Black youth

and young adults can worship God freely; where they can serve without barriers; and

where they are allowed to be heard, giving them voice as a vital part of the congregation.

As Borgman has stated forthrightly, the church must give our youth and young adults

what they desperately long for, a true and loving relationship with Jesus the Christ:

> There is a deep longing for such authenticity in young hearts. On the surface
> of their lives they are being seduced, as we all are, striving after false forms of
> personal pleasure, possessions, and power. The world has invented all manner
> of shortcuts to ultimate happiness. Behind the mad rush for the quick fix,
> transient fame, or relative success, young hearts often detect a kind of futility,
> a certain madness in the race for that which never satisfies, never rings
> completely true. Their hearts are longing for, if not open to, the perfect
> humanity of Jesus Christ who introduces us to the living God. (Borgman 2013,
> 51)

In the following pages, I will revisit my vision for ministry, and the actual, as well as, potential ways of implementing the aspects of the model and challenges I faced in the implementation of my vision through my project. I will attempt to restate the role that church leaders such as the pastor, along with youth leaders, must play if the vision is to come to fruition successfully within the congregation. I will reflect on how I measure success in relationship to the project and how that success is manifested within the constraints of the Summer Theater Project.

A Vision for Ministry

As has been stated previously, my vision is one of a church that is neither restrained by denominational, nor traditional walls that stifle the spiritual growth of our Black youth/young adults. A church without walls is one that is open to change and welcoming to all people. It is one whose focus is one of creating disciples not members; focused on church mission not just increased membership; strive to show and spread the love and light of Jesus through giving throughout the community and the world, not just within their four walls. A church without walls strives to promote justice not just having 'church' regardless of its denominational affiliation or ethnic composition.

What is Vision?

Proverbs 29:18a states, "Where there is no vision, the people perish…," (KJV), but what is vision? In my opinion, vision is both carnal as well as spiritual and I feel that Webster's definition of vision in the following bullet points reflects a combination of the two.

- It's the ability to see beyond the seeable.
- It's a by-product of thinking that produces images in the mind.

- It comes from the vivid imaginations of those who can think creatively
- It is an instantaneous image created by one's mind.
- It is the natural ability to see.
- It is the ability to see those things that are yet to come.
- It is a lovely sight that is seen with the naked eye.

In the process of implementing my project, all those characteristics or definitions were activated to bring the project to life. The focus group had to first put into the words the images or ideas that were lying dormmate in their brains.

Crafting the Vision

The Freedom to Create. The first aspect of the model to be activated is the freedom to create. By using the qualitative method along with ethnographic reflection each participant of the focus group was allowed an opportunity to put into words the feelings of disconnect and disenfranchisement they had experienced within their different congregations. The project allowed the youth and young adults to create and speak unrestrained by predetermined dialogue given to them by individuals who may or may not be in tune with their unspoken feelings of disconnect and disenfranchisement. By using the tool of creative thinking, they could think outside the boundaries of their various religious traditions and restrictive worship practices, and began to create dialogue for the play that would bring their heart's song to life that resulted in giving voice to their voiceless cries to be heard.

Opportunity to be Authentic Self. The second aspect of the model is giving the youth and young adults the opportunity to be their authentic selves. Using theater, the focus group gave my vision of creating churches without walls substance, a vision that could be comprehended by those community and church leaders that attended the final production of the play. Their creative use of improv brought to life those unspoken

words of hurt, doubt, disconnect, rejection, and separation that many of our Black youth and young adults feel within the Black church.

Leaders Becoming Listeners. The third and final aspect of the project is to give opportunity for the leaders of the church to become intentional listeners to the voices of our Black youth and young adults. By using theater to convey the conversational outcomes gleaned from the focus group, the youth/young adults created a relational connection between themselves and the church leaders and congregants present at the play, which, according to Borgman, is something youth leaders should strive to do. "We are strongly influenced, in ways beyond our knowledge, by those we don't even know. The family, then, is an internal system intertwined with external systems. Is there any question, then that our ministry must involve families and church communities, being relational in all ways and all levels?," (Borgman 2013, 115)?

To my knowledge, St. Paul does not have a vision statement that is paramount in the decisions concerning the development of outreach ministries (or the lack thereof) within the church. There is never any reference made concerning a mission statement, it is not written in the church bulletin, nor is it posted anywhere within the confines of the building. However, in response to the implementation of this project, the pastor has begun placing more emphasis upon the need for intentional outreach ministries that permeate into the surrounding communities. He is recognizing the need to be more inclusive of his youth and young adults in formulating curriculum and worship setting that are promotes an atmosphere of free worship and all-inclusive participation from all the congregants.

Activating the Authentic Self

In the following paragraphs I will reflect on activating the authentic self-including the how and why behind the focus group schedule of events, what was covered during focus group's discussion sessions, play development, along with what theatrical method was used and why. I will revisit some of the concrete outcomes and insights I received from the project. Also, once again, I will reflect on some of the limitations and challenges I faced when implementing a non-traditional project into a very traditional environment.

Focus Group Schedule. After poling the participants on what days and times would best facilitate the schedules of the potential focus group members, I decided on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at 6:00 p.m. in the church fellowship hall. This time allowed for everyone involved to complete their daily tasks, rather it be school or work, and be able and available to attend the focus group meetings. The group met for four weeks, twice weekly. In the final week, we met three times, twice for the focus group and once for the final play.

Each week, we covered a different topic concerning the feelings of disconnect affecting our Black youth and young adults. Each topic dealt with one of three groups mainly affected by the attitudes of unconcern and disenfranchisement toward our youth and young adults on the part of church leaders and congregants. On the first day, we focused on a particular group with a discussion question attached and the second day, we developed the character that would represent that group within the play which was comprised of three acts and a closing theme song that was performed by the entire cast.

Questions Discussed in Focus Group. As has been afore mentioned, I decided

to focus on three particular groups of youth and young adults that are believed, by

experts in the field of ministry to youth and young adults, to be directly affected by the

disconnect permeating the Black church. I facilitated three weeks of open, and honest

discussion among the focus group members, with the fourth week serving as a wrap-up

of the discussions, completion of the play development and rehearsals. The following

is a brief break- down of the groups, questions, and background sources used to initiate

the focus group discussions.

Week 1

- Group focus: The Millennials
- Discussion question: How does the Black church balance spiritualism and materialism with a generation whose focus and goal is based on capitalism?
- Background resource: *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* by Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer

Week 2

- Group focus: The Nones
- Discussion question: How do we create an environment that promotes a reconnect for Nones to our traditional Black Christian faith?
- Background resource: *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* by James Emery White

Week 3

- Group focus: Disconnected Youth
- Discussion question: How do we represent a loving, all-inclusive God to a generation of youth who by society and the traditional Black church have been written off as disposable commodities, a detriment to democracy, and less than human?
  - For those who never knew the faith?
  - For those who lived sheltered lives never knowing the other side of life until they met it head on after leaving the protective arms of their parents?
- Background resource: *The School-To-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment* by Christopher A. Mallett, and *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty by Henry A. Giroux*

Week 4

- Group focus: Overall topic wrap-up
- Discussion question: Summarize and list any possible solutions to the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected youth and young adults to the Black church that can be implemented on the local, as well as, the universal levels of the Black church
- Background resource: *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe, Jr.

The discussion was not limited to these questions. They only served as a starting point that lead to deeper discussion and insight on the part of the participants. Because it was a judgement-free environment and each participant was of the same mind, the participants were able to express their authentic selves and speak from their hearts. Also, there are many other astute theologians, and youth leaders in the field of youth and young adult ministry, but I chose the resources and authors previously indicated for the weekly meetings because I felt that their writings best addressed the questions and answers I focused upon for this particular project. The participants were able to relate to the writers and could hear their concerns being voiced within the pages of writers' books giving affirmation to the feelings of disconnect that they were and had experienced from their perspective congregations.

Play Development

The characters, foundation, and development for the play were based on the group's focus and discussion questions I designed for the focus group. Because there was no written script for most of the play and creative freedom was given to the actor in the first skit in relation to the written monologue, each person was able to present their character based on their authentic selves. The youth and young adults were able

to speak from their place of pain, concern, and need to be heard. They were free to use their true voice.

On the second day (Thursdays) of each week's discussion, we mainly concentrated on character development for the play. I based each character on the readings used as the background resource and, with my input, the group was responsible for developing the personality and dialogue to be used in the theatrical production.

For week one, our focus character was a successful young adult business woman whom the group decided to name Ashley, a product of the millennial generation. The group decided that she would be very well educated, materialistic and career driven with issues concerning the mainstream religion in which she received her spiritual and religious nurturing. Using input from the members of the focus group, I decided on a one woman monologue entitled *I Got This: A Millennial Monologue,* which was brilliantly executed by Tonya Marsh, a young adult mother of eight.

 I was the original author of the monologue; however, Tonya was given the freedom to improvise and interject her interpretation of the character which opened the door for her to be her authentic self and to express her frustrations and desires to be heard and her unspoken, misaddressed, needs she felt needed to be met by the Black church.

In week two, the group focused on and developed the character of a None. The participants decided to portray the character as a young, Black, male college student who was having issues with his faith in God. He had lost his faith in traditional religion

and was dealing with a crisis of faith in the things he had been taught as a child growing up in the Black church of his parents and ancestors.

This skit was completely improvised and entitled *There's Got to Be More Than This*. It was performed by the 15 year old youth, Kasey Bond, and the Christian Education Director Shirley Mitchell who embodied the character of the school nurse who used her Christian experience to witness to and to help the young man work through his faith issues. Neither character had a name because they represented the universal struggle felt by many young adults that find themselves falling into the category of a *None.*

During the third week, the group focused on the plight of our Black youth and the negative perception the Black church and society has, as a whole, concerning their worth and contribution (or lack thereof) to the Black church, as well as, to society. The focus group participants developed a character who was gender neutral. The main character did not have a name (actually, no one did in this particular skit), the individual (portrayed by Tonya Marsh) was a victim of the system and their environment, and was a member of an unnamed street gang.

The title that the group created spoke volumes to those participating, as well as, to the audience, *It Could Have Been Me.* Due to time restraints and unforeseen situations arising, I was only able to have one rehearsal before the night of the play which we scheduled during the fourth week, and each actor was responsible for what they would wear to better highlight their character.

Once again, improv was the bases for the dialogue. Within this skit, all the members of the focus group were able to participate because the setting for the play was a nontraditional church party held at a community center within the youth's neighborhood. I played the part of a energetic, nontraditional, community pastor whose main goal was seeking to reach out to people in the area surrounding the church in order to reconnect the disconnected youth and young adults of the community back to the local Black church. Tonya, as well as myself, tapped into our own childhood feelings of being disconnected and rejected by those around us as a source of reflection as we dialoged within the boundaries of the skit.

Activating the Leader's Role as Listener

The third aspect of this project is the opportunity to become an intentional listener. As pastors, we are typically expected to have all the answers to everyone's questions, and in trying to do so, oftentimes, we forget to listen for the questions or we drawn out the voices of our Black youth and young adults with that of our own. When we become intentional listeners of the listeners, we stop placing our own definitions and expectations upon our youth and young adults and allow them to express and be who they authentically are. Thus, we free them from the bonds of disconnect, invisibility, and feelings of disenfranchisement. Powe, Jr., states, "The fact that Jesus saw her and included her in God's mission redefined her understanding of herself. This what African American congregations did for many blacks: the church redefined their understanding of self by not allowing others to define who they were," (Powe, Jr 2012, 33).

Tools for Application

The following is a recap of the resources, equipment, and academic materials I used to execute my project.

Location:

- St Paul Christian Methodist Church Fellowship Hall, 808 Pruitt Street, Bolivar, TN 38008; (731) 658-6688

- Carl Perkins Center, 18 Highway, Bolivar, TN 38008; (731) 659-2313

- ***Human Resources***

- Videographer- Kasey Bond, 15 years old

- ***Equipment***

- Video camera

- Digital recorder

- ***Academic Resources***

- *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty* by Henry A. Giroux

- *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* by James Emery White

- *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe, Jr

- *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment* by Christopher A. Mallett

This list is simply a reflection of what was used to implement the project for this *group* concerning the topic at hand, however, the list can be modified based upon the size and focus of each individual group in relation to the subject matter for future projects.

Concrete Outcomes and Insights

Reference has previously been made about the outcomes of the project. But, it is important to revisit the outcomes here because a ministry comes alive and stays alive

only insofar as leaders reflect on what happened. After implementing any project, it is important to reflect on the outcomes, rather positive or negative, and any insights that may or may not have materialized for those who participated as well as for those who have been directly or indirectly affected by the project's implementation.

During the focus group meetings, those who participated discovered that the experiences and feelings of disconnect they each felt or had felt in the past, were very similar despite their generational differences, as well as, their varied denominational affiliations. By sharing their ethnological stories, they discovered that those feelings of not fitting in, those feelings of being ignored and overlooked by their religious leaders within their congregations was one of many common threads that was shared by all.

The group discovered that once you allow the other person to speak and be heard without judgement; when the senior congregants give ear to the youth and young adults, (and they give the same respect to the seniors), they found out that they were all saying and seeing the same problem, just from different vantage points. Once they could understand this important fact, the group was then able to formulate solutions to the problem that could be implemented within the local congregation to address the needs of the entire congregation possibly resulting in reconnecting the Black youth and young adults back to the Black church.

The use of ethnological methodology presented through the use of theater would also allow the church leaders, as well as, the rest of the congregation the opportunity

and privilege to genuinely listen and hear their otherwise voiceless cries for acceptance as viable members of the body of Christ and valued members of the congregation.

Challenges and Limitations

I encountered many challenges and limitations as I attempted to give life to my vision through the implementation of my project. Since I chose to work with a small focus group, one of the major challenges that I faced was that of full commitment on the part of the volunteers. I was continually having to replace and regroup due to individuals, (some due to know fault of their own), having to drop out of the project at the last minute, or other simply not showing up for the meetings without calling in advance.

I thought that would have to change my original format, but, although the generational demographics had changed, it turned out that it was the perfect generational balance that was needed for the focus group to produce the necessary outcome of exploring the problem of the disconnect between our Black youth/young adults and the aging traditional Black church.

It is important to restate once again that another disturbing issue was that of the technology for recording the project. I initially planned to create a video diary of the project that would cover the focus group sessions up to the final presentation of the play, but, because of a lack of financial funding, I was unable to acquire a professional videographer to do the recording and editing. Instead, I had to depend on the youth who volunteered to take care of that process, but, because they lacked the knowledge

needed to properly do the job, the footage, or the lack thereof, was non-usable. My only recourse was to omit that portion of my project.

I learned that flexibility is very important when employing the use of Millennials and Post-Millennials because their work loads, ambition, and school activities are always set in over-drive. Their attention is stretched thin, so, whenever this project is implemented, the facilitator must be flexible enough to work around the participants' schedule. Another important asset is the use of financial sponsors so that monies will be available to pay for those tools needed to successfully complete all aspects of the project.

The Usefulness of the Model for Others

As has been afore mentioned, the positive side of this project is that it allows youth and young adults an opportunity to engage in productive conversation over issues that interest them freely, but, because it is focused on a very small congregation located in a small rural town, this particular expression of the model may not be truly relevant, or a cohesive reflection of the experiences of the larger urban churches, however, because the model is fluid and, therefore, conformable to the congregation and its needs, it can be transformed and designed to fit the location in which it is implemented.

Also, although Caucasian youth and young adult leaders/pastors have frequent interaction with other Black youth and young adults on their jobs, as well as, other community functions, their perspective congregations may not be open to incorporating a Black-based model for reconnecting disconnected youth/young adults into their predominately Caucasian religious educational curriculum.

The Role of the Pastor and Leaders

I thank the members of the focus group for sacrificing their time and talents to be a part of my project, but, none of this would have been possible without the help and support of the pastor and officers of Saint Paul C. M. E. Church, nor the support of the religious leaders and congregants in the surrounding community who graciously gave of their time to come out to the final program.

Those in leadership positions must be vigilant when seeking to address the needs of our Black youth/young adults. They must have listening ears and be willing to allow youth to speak with their authentic voices. Church leadership must respect the youth and young adults' need for honesty from those who are leading them. Wimberly, Barnes, and Johnson states, "Some say that youth are the leaders of tomorrow's church and world, while others assert that they are *today's* leaders. In congregations where the latter view is true, youth ministry flourishes and congregational vitality thrives. This situation validates the notion that youth can and need to find and own their own skills for leadership from the pulpit to the wider life of the church to service in the community for their sake and for the sake of the whole community," (Wimberly, et 2013, 42).

In other words, the leaders of the church have an obligation to nurture and prepare our Black youth/young adults to be the leaders, teachers, and preachers of the Black church for today and in the future. If we are to successfully repair the disconnect that permeates throughout the Black church, we must as pastors and youth leaders, become intentional in our efforts to reach out to our Black youth and young adults in a way that is genuine and fueled by a dedicated heart to God, a loving spirit rooted in

Christ, and a deep abiding desire to see *all* our Black youth /young adults thrive spiritually, socially, economically, and emotionally, seeking to reconnect the disconnect, becoming *intentional* listeners to the listener.

Measuring Success

According to Webster's definition of success, the concept of *'success'* can mean different things for different people. For some, it is the completion of a task, for others, it is the gain of wealth and fame, while, still for others, it is the acquisition of a family and home. Some academic concepts of success involve being able to present your argument in a persuasive, clear manner supported by evidence that is able to hold up under scrutiny in a defined, well organized manner. Various rubrics to measure personal success are based on levels ranging from novice (being the least successful) to expert which refers to someone who exhibits outstanding leadership qualities, a positive attitude, follows instructions, takes responsibility for their actions, and always strives to do their best, (https:images.search.yahoo.com).

In terms of my project, success means that I was able to give voice to our Black youth and young adults. It means that I was able to create a space that is conducive to the leaders of the church having listening ears to the authentic cries of our youth/young adults. I feel that I have been successful if I see the pastor and youth leaders being intentional in including the youth/young adults in the workings of the church, using them in positions of leadership, allowing them to express themselves freely in the worship experience, and intentionally seeking to listen to and to meet their need to be authentic in their worship of God.

When I see this occurring, for me that is the litmus test for the success of my project. Since I implemented my project at St. Paul, the pastor has stepped back from micro-managing every aspect of the teaching and worshiping experience and deliberately recruited the services of our young adults as teachers in the Sunday School, and become more diligent in allowing the youth and young adults to be active participants, as well as, facilitators during the worship services. The pastor does this by allowing them to pray, read scripture, serve as acolytes, and as ushers during the worship of giving. He also intentionally seeks their suggestions for possible ministries to incorporate within the dynamics of the church ministry.

When I look at success through the eyes of God, I am reminded of two scriptures within the bible. The first is Matthew 5:16 in which Jesus proclaims, "Let your light so shine before [humanity], that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven," (KJV). My theological interpretation of this text is that God sees us as being successful when the works that we do cause those in darkness to see God in us and through us in such a glorious way that it propels them into a desire to worship God.

As pastors and youth leaders, we must live a life before our Black youth and young adults that are true representations of Jesus' love and compassion for all humanity. They must see true commitment in our service to God and to God's people. Our youth, as well as our young adults, are very perceptive and know when someone truly cares about their welfare. Pretense and imitation is not an option if we are to be

successful in reconnecting our Black youth/young adults to the Black church of their forefathers.

The second scripture is John 12:32 in which Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all [humanity] unto me," (KJV). In verse 33, the writer explains that what Jesus was referring to when he makes this statement, it is his death upon the cross, but, for me, it has an even deeper meaning. Although I know what Jesus is speaking of within the context of the text, however, I believe that there is more there between the lines. I see a message and a mandate for the universal church to lift up the name of Jesus high above any other name when we give Jesus the glory and the honor that Jesus is due, when we worship Jesus in spirit and in truth giving God a radical praise that allows others to see our passion, love, and honor for our God and, then, are drawn to Christ.

When our Black youth/young adults recognize and acknowledge that we as pastors and youth leaders are genuine in our love and commitment to Jesus, they are drawn to God and to the church, which, by God's standards, is a mark of success. It is rooted in the Great Commission that is given to the disciples, as well as, to the church of today. "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.   Amen, (KJV, Math 28:18-20).

Chapter 5

For The Sake Of Others

A critical point made earlier was that there are so many different religious beliefs and traditions throughout our Black communities. There are different groups, different denominations, different theologies, and different concepts concerning Jesus and how God perceives us. Romans 12:4 reminds us that we are many members but one body in Christ Jesus and that is a beautiful thing, however, for many of our youth and young adults, having so much diversity in our theological practices can be very confusing to them.

An Endeavor Built from Hope

The confusion over various religious beliefs and theological practices became a very serious issue for my daughter Camille and her husband Johntate. As a matter of fact, the last argument they had before he assassinated her (a story for another time) and later killed himself was, in part, over his continued spiritual instability. I realized this one day as I listened to a conversation between my twenty-six-year-old daughter and her twenty-four-year-old husband. As I mentioned in the introduction, My daughter had a solid religious foundation. The teachings of Christ were the basis of all that we taught to our children. Although she had experienced several religious traditions in her short life, she was yet very rooted in what she believed to be the truth

of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. Her husband's upbringing, however, was totally the opposite of hers. He had attended church occasionally as a child, without ever developing a stable religious foundation. The instability in his religious and theological training left him unsure of what was the truth concerning God, and like many of our Black youth and young adults, he found himself spiritually adrift, which in turn left him feeling disconnected from the body of Christ, as well as, the church universal.

When our youth are not rooted in their understanding, basic understanding of the person of Jesus the Christ and God's teachings, they are like saplings with roots that are not planted in the nourishing ground. They are disconnected from the life-giving nourishment that comes from being rooted in a sound understanding, and confident relationship with Christ, along with a healthy, nurturing, accepting congregation.

The members of the focus group were in agreement with this theological perspective. The young adult mother of eight had reflected on a similar situation in her search for a nurturing church home for her and her many children. One of the main problems that she was experiencing was finding a church that had a youth program intentionally designed to meet the needs of her entire family's social, spiritual, economical, and emotional needs. Her fear, along with many Black youth and young adults, is that if this disconnect is not corrected and the connection restored, it will result in the spiritual decay and death of their spirits, and, eventually, their very souls.

My hope for entering into and carrying out this doctoral project was that it would result in formulating possible solutions to the disconnect between our Black youth and young adults and the Black church. My aim was to give voice to the voiceless

Black youth and young adults of our church, resulting in making adequate space for them to be able to engage in authentic worship with the God of their understanding, and encourage intentional listening ears on the part of Black church leaders to the desperate cries for inclusion on the part of our youth and young adults. It was as the title of my project indicates: to create churches without walls as a means of reconnecting the disconnect between our Black youth and young adults and the Black church.

This hope was realized on the night of the play. Many of the visiting youth leaders and minister who were part of the listening audience were visibly moved by the raw emotions and dialogue brought forth by the youth and young adults participants. At the end of the play, different individuals stood and made positive comments about the need to listen to what our Black youth and young adults have to say.

After the event, I noticed an intentional change in the attitude of the pastor of church in his approach to seeking to be more inclusive of the Black youth and young adults within his congregation. However, for whatever the reason may be, I have noticed that the initial zeal is beginning to wax cold within the congregation, but, it is finding momentum within the community. Because of my public cries for the church and community to reach out to our Black youth and young adults, I have been asked by the Democratic Party chairperson to run for the office of County Commissioner in the hope that I will be able to help change the disconnect and lack of concern for our Millennials and Post Millennials within our community resulting in creating recreational spaces and jobs that will seek to meet their needs.

As Christians, especially as Christian leaders, oftentimes we can become overwhelmed, and dare I say, cynical about the endless sea of needy and hurting Black youth and young adults, and our seemingly continued inability to make a significant difference in their lives. If we are not careful, we will become hardened and mistrusting of those youth and young adults who knock at our church doors because of the unending news stories, newspaper headlines on Black-on-Black crime, purveyors of youth and young adult gun violence, and gang-bangers who prey on vulnerable churches who have a passion and a vision to relieve the suffering of others.

My Core Beliefs Within and Beyond the Ministry Setting

Oftentimes, I have heard leaders say that the youth and young adults are the church of tomorrow, but I believe and declare that they are the church of today. Those in authority within the church must be willing to intentionally give voice, adequate space, and intentional listening ears to the black youth and young adults of our church. In my experiences as a pastor, the willing workers in my former congregations were youth and young adults. They were always ready to go beyond the walls, and were willing to think outside of the box, whereas the senior congregants were content to just go through the motions of church but not according to knowledge nor with any passion for ministry.

My core belief which is based on my experiences as a youth and young adult growing up in the Black church as well as my experience as a preacher/pastor of twenty-seven years is that the atmosphere of a faith community must be nurturing, welcoming, and conducive for youth and young adult's spiritual growth. This project enabled me

(and has the potential to enable other churches and community organizations) the opportunity to nurture an atmosphere that was welcoming and conducive to spiritual growth and community outreach, which, in turn, resulted in each church, *potentially*, becoming a positive change agent within their respective communities.

It is my belief that our Black youth and young adults have a zeal for Christ and it is for this reason I decided to approach the problem in a welcoming round-table, unfiltered discussion. This ethnographic methodology focused on allowing our Black youth and young adults to voice their thoughts on the Black church in an effort to answer such questions as what is needed to make the Black church more relevant to them, what do they feel the Black church can do to meet the spiritual, social, and emotional needs for Millennials and Post-Millennials? What ministries can the Black church develop that will give voice to the voiceless cries of our Black youth and young adults and, also, serve to meet, reach, and teach about the challenging issues that Black youth and young adults face daily in the 21st Century? I know as a pastor, in order for these questions to be addressed and resolved in a productive way, the congregation must be open to newness and posses a willingness to think and act outside of their *traditional religious box*.

What Was Not Done.

The focus group, despite its very eclectic generational diversity, was able to agree on many of the problems they believed to be responsible for the disconnect between our Black youth and young adults, as well as, possible solutions. The members of the group agreed that the Black church needs to be more open to new ways of

conducting ministry. Those ministries need to focus on the relevant issues facing our youth and young adults such as gang violence, school and cyber-bullying, and social justice (or the lack thereof). The focus group was able to present the outcome of their discussions very effectively through the use of the play. However, unfortunately, it did not translate into the pastor and church leaders instituting a theater program as a part of the educational curriculum for their youth and young adult department. Although suggestions were made to the leadership of the congregation for more youth and young adult-friendly programs and ministries, there has been no follow-through on the part of the pastor or church leaders to implement that programming, such as a children and youth choir, praise dance team, or youth and young adult bible study groups.

Envisioning the Future

As for me, as a pastor and minister of twenty-seven years, I have experienced situations such as individuals preying on the caring nature of sincere, Holy Spirit-led congregations. However, over the years I have learned through trial and error, that, as Christian leaders, we must not allow the deceitful tricks of the ungodly to harden our hearts to the truly needy and deafen our ears to the voice of God continually calling us to lend our ears to the desperate cries of those in despair, and especially those muzzled voices of our Black youth and young adults.

Future Hope for the Sake of Others

We must endeavor to intentionally listen to the listener. In other words, as leaders and pastors, we must engage in intentionally conversation with our Black youth and young adults which will allow them to speak freely and candidly about their

spiritual needs and aspirations for themselves and the church without judgement or any preconceived conclusions.

We must give voice to the voiceless Black youth and young adults of our many different congregations. My vision is that one day we will be able to truly become churches without walls. The Black church will become a nurturing, welcoming space that is no longer declaring spiritual warfare upon each other, and no longer disregarding the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of our youth and young adults. I hope that in the future, parents, congregants, along with pastors and youth leaders, will no longer restrict their youth and young adults to the stifling demands of outdated religious traditions that retard their spiritual growth and youthful enthusiasm for unbridled worship.

As I move forward in my journey as a pastor and youth and young adult leader, I hope to be able to implement theater programs within the congregations to which I am assigned in order to provide the youth and young adults with a platform from which they may speak with their authentic voices, unhindered by those congregants that are chained to tradition. I envision that one day my local church, as well as the Black church universal, will no longer be only concerned about those within the four walls of their buildings. Rather, that they will become mission driven, and ministry oriented, so much so, that our walls will be bursting at the seams with youth and young adults who are being heard and spiritually fed by those of us who have been called to give light, love, care, and direction to those who are lost, suffering, and in despair.

I hope that the model of using theater to give voice to the voiceless will become a standard for youth ministries throughout my conference, as well as, within other congregations within my community. Ultimately, the Black church will provide an opportunity for our Black youth and young adults to express their true self and be heard by church leaders and congregants so that they may become a vital, intricate part of their perspective congregations no longer feeling disconnected from the church of their ancestors.

Appendixes

Summer Theater Project

"Giving Voice To The Voiceless"

Rev. Barbara Fitzhugh, Facilitator

Project Statement

Objective

- Establish the committee comprised of Rev. Steven B. Mayhorn, Preacher-In-Charge, Mrs. Shirley

  Mitchell, Christian Education Director, Michael Miller, Trustee Chairman, Ann

  Wimberly and Edward Wimberly, Cohorts. These individuals will constitute

  my sounding board committee and will be responsible for providing strategic

  project oversight to help maintain a clear and concise project objective.

- Establish focus group which will be comprised of a combination of five youth

  and young adults ranging in age from thirteen to thirty-five years of age. Their

  purpose will be to generate dialogue based on four weeks of discussion about

  the problem of how to reconnect our disconnected Black youth/young adults to

  the Black church. From these discussions, the goal is to produce possible

  solutions to the problem that can be implemented within the local church and

  beyond. They will also be responsible for co-writing and co-producing a play

  to help illuminate the problem and possible solutions in such a manner that even

  the most indifferent congregant will be encouraged to take notice.

- In collaboration with the sounding board committee, the focus group will present a play as a finale to the project in the style of improvisation based on the characters provided by the facilitator, and discussion information gleaned from the weekly discussion group. The group will meet twice weekly on days determined by the sounding board committee, and based on what will be convenient for the focus group members. Day one of each week will be focused on discussion of the assigned question for that week and day two of each week will be dedicated to preparation for the play.

PROJECT BREAKDOWN DELIVERABLES

PROJECT TASK	MEETING SCHEDULE	COMPLETION TIME
Form SBC	As Needed	June 4, 2017
Form FG	2x weekly	June 4, 2017

MEETING SCHEDULE

Week 1   **Date/Time**

Day 1   Tues 6/13 6:00p.m.

Focus Character: Valley Girl- Materialistic, asked to connect with the spiritual

Discussion Question: How to balance spiritualism and materialism with a generation whose focus and goal is based on capitalism.

Background Source: *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* by Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer

Day 2   **Thurs. 6/15 6:00p.m.**

Discuss character development for the play

Week 2

Day 1   Tues 6/20   6:00 p.m.

Focus Character: A None: Does not believe in traditional religion. Considers themselves to be "Spiritual" or believe in a "higher power".

Discussion Question: How do we create an environment that promotes a reconnect for Nones to our traditional Black Christian Faith ?

Background Source: *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* by James Emery White

Day 2

Discuss character development for the play

           Thurs. 6/22 6:00 p.m.

Week 3

Day 1   Tues. 6/27 **6:00 p.m.**

Focus Character: Juvenile Delinquent: In the system, disconnected from society, former gang member.

Discussion Question: How do we represent a loving, all-inclusive God to a generation of youth who by society and the traditional Black church have been written off as disposable commodities, a detriment to democracy and less than human?

    o For those who never knew the faith ?
    o Those who lived sheltered lives never knowing the other side until they met it head on?

Background Source: *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment* by Christopher A. Mallett and *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty* by Henry A. Giroux

Day 2   Thurs. 6/29 6:00 p.m.

Discuss character development for the play
Week 4
Day 1   Tues 7/11 **6:00 p.m.**

Discussion Question: Wrap up of discussions. Summarize and list any possible solutions to the problem that can be implemented by the Black church.
Background Source: *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe Jr.
Day 2   **Thurs. 7/13 6:00 p.m.**
Final Rehearsal for the play

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Location:
- St. Paul Christian Methodist Church Fellowship Hall, 808 Pruitt Street, Bolivar, TN.
  38008. 731 658-6688
- Carl Perkins Center, 18 Highway, Bolivar, TN 38008. 731 659-2313

Human Resources
- Videographer- Will be responsible for filming and recording all sessions and the play and producing a quality film.

Equipment
- Video Camera
- Tape Recorder

Required Books
- *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty* by Henry A. Giroux
- T*he Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* by
  James Emery White
- *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe Jr.
- *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment* by Christopher A. Mallett

RELEASE FORM

I_____ give Rev. Barbara Jean Fitzhugh permission

to record my imagine and my voice during the implementation of the Summer Theater

Project: Giving Voice to the Voiceless and for any other purpose connected with

pursuing and implementing this project wherever deemed necessary by Rev. Barbara

Jean Fitzhugh, the Interdenominational Theological Center of Atlanta, Georgia, or the

church universal.

Signature _____

Date _____

STATEMENT OF OCCASSION FOR PLAY

We are living in an age where more and more Black churches are facing the decline of their youth and young adult congregants. More and more of our youth are being forced into the school to prison pipeline by unjust laws, and inadequate school systems, while the church stands silently by. More and more of our young adults are suffering spiritual starvation while sitting at the table of our traditional Black churches who refuse to hear the cries of our youth and young adults to be included and respected as vibrant, essential members of the body of Christ; while the Black church refuses to submit their will to the will and authority of the Holy Spirit in order to be transformed through the renewing of our minds. Our goal is to create churches without walls by tearing down the man-made obstacles between the Black church and those voices crying out in the wilderness pleading to be heard. Tonight, open your eyes that you might see, open your ears that you might hear as we strive to give voice to the voiceless.

Theme Song

"GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS"

(*Song to a calypso beat*)

Lyrics by

Barbara Jean Fitzhugh

Jesus said,

To the disciples one day,

Let the children come,

Please don't push them away.

They are crying out,

Wanting to be heard,

We must come as children,

For that is the word.

CHORUS

Giving voice, to the voiceless

It's time for the church to wake up,

And give voice to the voiceless,

If we want to be pleasing to our Lord.

I GOT THIS

A MILLENNIAL MONOLOGUE

Hello. My name is Ashley. As you can see, I am a young, vibrant, independent, wealthy business woman. I am well educated. Why, I have a BS, MA, MBA, and a PhD; by the age of thirty, I will have all the letters of the alphabet behind my name!

Where do I go to church you ask. Well, I am a member of the Hallelujah Greet Meet and Eat Walled In Denominational Till I Die Do Nothing But Gather For Sunday Morning Traditional Church. I was raised in that church and forced to attend every Sunday morning growing up, but I promised myself that when I became my own boss, my life would be better and I would live it according to my own rules. No more church or stall religion for me. Don't get me wrong, I am sure religion and church has its place in society, but it is not a priority for me. I want to be a game changer. I am designed to change the world, and I can't do that at a church whose only desire is to accumulate members who fit their profile as acceptable, who raise money in order to have big bank accounts and then argue over giving back to the less fortunate and keep it for their own selfish profit, and then build big, beautiful buildings just for bragging rights!

I can do more good deeds on my own. But I must admit, with all my money, and all my success, something is still missing in my life. There is a void in my heart, a need to serve others in a way that goes beyond just speaking flowery, empty words from a pulpit. I am ambitious, driven, and motivated. I want my life to matter. I am looking for a church that actually matters to the community. I would love to be a part of a church that thinks outside the box. I tried explaining that to my church officers

and my pastor, but they could not bear me. Maybe one day. My name is Ashley, and

I am a millennial. You need to hear my voice.

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