

THE WRITING OF PRAYERS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

**A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry**

Advisor: Dr. Gary V. Simpson, D.Min.

W. B. Davidson

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

May 2014

Copyright © 2014 by W. B. Davidson

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

THE WRITING OF PRAYERS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

Reverend W. B. Davidson

Roger Williams Institutional Baptist Church,

Passaic, New Jersey

Prayer has always been the cornerstone of the African American church. Prayer in conjunction with tribal ritual, and spirit-filled preaching, kept hope alive for Africans of the Diaspora in the Americas, despite the overwhelming challenges and obstacles they encountered. The prohibition against education, and the restrictions against gathering in mass, could not prevent the African in America, from praying to the Divine Presence. Perhaps, the Holy One of their original prayers was not the God they later came to know however, communication with that Presence, remained essential to the worship experience. Prayer was an indispensable element that provided African Americans the power to progress from a seemingly hopeless journey, to a destination of promise.

Many worshippers, whom attend predominately African American churches, possess a negative attitude towards writing prayers for worship. The prevailing concern is that written prayers, lack the sincerity and spontaneity, of the traditional extemporaneous prayers. The challenge of the African American church today is, to

reconnect with the past, while simultaneously maintaining an upward trajectory towards the future. The spiritual discipline of writing prayers for worship can become that vehicle of reconnection. This shift towards writing prayers need not come at the expense of the oral tradition; they can coexist. However, given the complex variety of concerns facing African American worshippers, the writing of prayers as a spiritual discipline, may help focus our pleading before God. Therefore, the challenge confronting my community of concern is to appreciate the value, in writing prayers as a spiritual discipline.

DEDICATION

I am writing you today Dad, so that you can share this moment of achievement with me. You had been there from the beginning unfortunately, we did not complete this walk together. Therefore, I dedicate this educational achievement to you. We have not always shared the same vision, nor did we always see eye to eye however, we both loved the same God and family. I realize that circumstances beyond your control prevented you from rising to the heights of which you felt capable. Therefore, since you were unable, please allow me to do it for the both of us.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. A LEGACY OF PRAYER IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCH.....	1
2. CHURCH HISTORY.....	15
3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND PERSPECTIVE.....	27
4. PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	37
5. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION.....	47
6. PROJECT EVALUATION.....	68
APPENDICES	
A. SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	80
B. WRITING PRAYERS (POWERPOINT PRESENTATION).....	84
C. LENTEN PRAYER BOOKLET.....	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	126

CHAPTER 1

A LEGACY OF PRAYER IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

In order to understand the 21st Century African American Baptist Church, it is necessary to revisit the stony road the Church has trod. Through the years, the Baptist church has been often times revered, and sometimes reviled for its spontaneity. History credits, Roger Williams for establishing the first Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639. Our church has the distinction of being named in memory of this Baptist pioneer. Therefore, it is vitally important for the people of our church to know who Roger Williams was, in order to establish a connection between him and our church. The denomination continued to grow, even establishing the General Missionary Convention for foreign missions in 1814. In 1845, amid mounting racial tensions, “Southerners formed their own Southern Baptist Convention in order to carry on the work of their churches more effectively.”¹

Partly due to what has become known as the Third Great Awakening, the great majority of blacks in pre-Civil War days were either Baptist or Methodist. This Awakening was closely affiliated with the “Social Gospel”² movement, which aligned

¹ Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations In The United States*, 10th ed. rv. Samuel S. Hill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 51.

² Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity, and the Social Crisis* (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1907).

social issues with Christianity. However, it seems “The lack of formality in Baptist churches, together with the absence of ritual and the freedom and democracy of the local congregation, appealed to blacks more than did the Episcopal structure of the Methodist Church.”³

Actually, African Americans have long been recognized as part of the Baptist community. Silver Bluff Baptist Church near Augusta, Georgia was established in 1773, giving it the distinction as one of the first black Baptist churches in the Americas. In fact, Andrew Bryan, a slave, was the first pastor of First African Baptist Church in Savannah Georgia. This church was organized through the efforts of Jesse Peter, who was black, and Abraham Marshall who was white. It was not uncommon for white slaveholders in the South to provide places of worship and religious teaching for their slaves, but for the most part slaves sat in balconies of white churches, with little opportunity to exercise their faith.

Today among African Americans who attend church regularly, more than half claim membership in the Baptist church. “The autonomy of the local congregation in the Baptist denomination continues to be coveted by its membership today.”⁴ “Baptists are united on the basic principle of theological individualism, a belief that the individual is able to interpret the will of God for him/herself. The individual is responsible for determining biblical truths in communion with God and fellowship with Jesus the

³ Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations In The United States*, 10th ed. rv. Samuel S. Hill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 52.

⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/national-baptist-convention-usa-inc> (accessed Dec. 3, 2013).

Christ.”⁵ According to information from the World Council of Churches, the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., of which I am a member, has a membership of 7,500,000. “Founded in 1886, the National Baptist Convention USA Inc. is the oldest and largest African American religious convention in the USA.”⁶

IN THE BEGINNING

I was born in northern New Jersey at the tail end of the Baby Boom Generation. Rachael Claire Bradley describes this demographic as “The generation who was born during the demographic Post–World War II baby boom between the years 1946 and 1964. They are risk-takers, idealistic, workaholics, confident, and visionaries.”⁷ Embracing these qualities, those born during this era often rejected or redefined the status quo and traditional values, in favor of a more modern, forward thinking. Countless young men and women in an effort to become a catalyst for change joined the Civil Rights movement, participating in acts of civil disobedience such as marches and sit-ins. Many boomers who became teenagers or young adults during the turbulent 1960’s tended to gravitate to the ideals of counter-culturalist Timothy Leary, who in 1967 encouraged people to “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”⁸ Interestingly, a more modern adaptation of that idiom has been gaining traction; defining “Tune in as waking up and see the world as it

⁵ Edward T. Hiscox, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1985), 216.

⁶ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/national-baptist-convention-usa-inc> (accessed Nov. 21, 2013).

⁷ <http://www.rachelclairebradley.wordpress.com/2013/12/01/analyzing-generations/>(accessed Dec. 3. 2013).

⁸ Timothy Leary, *Turn on, Tune in, Drop out* (Oakland: Ronin Publishing Inc. 1965)

really is...Turn on, start doing what you love...and Drop out, stop wasting time and energy on government, politics, and arguments.”⁹

Throughout the twentieth century, Passaic County was a manufacturing hub. The mighty Passaic River provided the power source for many factories, which produced rubber, textiles, plastics, and various other goods. Some of the more memorable factories and mills that fueled the city's economy were the Passaic Cotton Mills, the Manhattan Rubber Company, the Paterson Parchment Paper Company, and the Dundee Power and Water Company. For decades, Passaic stood apart as a center of manufacturing, industry, and progress.

It was not uncommon to have entire families employed by the same company, one working the day shift and the other at night. The city had three full service hospitals; Beth Israel (Jewish), Passaic General, and St. Mary's (Catholic), which provided employment and excellent care to the residents of Passaic, and the surrounding area. Passaic was a microcosm of the national ethnic landscape, various cultures working together, but living separately. Residents engaged one another during work and school however, to use a boxing analogy, when the bell rang they returned to neutral corners.

Reflecting back on my formative years, I can say that I had it better than most. Though I wanted many things, my hardworking parents provided for all my needs. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Passaic became a haven for European immigrants seeking a better life. As the Polish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants flocked to Passaic County seeking employment, the African American community increased as well. My parents were traditional church going people who believed not only in Jesus as the

⁹ <http://www.freemansperspective.com/turn-on-tune-in-drop-out/>(accessed Nov. 23, 2013).

Christ, but also the church as his sacred bride. Baptist by denomination, we were members of the Union Baptist Church, under the dynamic leadership of the late Rev. Dr. Theodore Haskins Alexander, the only pastor I had ever known. As a family, we were fully engaged in the traditions of the church.

As a youngster, I enjoyed attending church. Our family and church life was an essential component of our family dynamic. Not only did my extended biological family attend the Union church, in addition, many of my friends worshipped there. The ceremonial processions, the songs of Zion, continue to resonate with me today. However, of all the traditional worship practices of the church, the one that had always intrigued me was the prayers of the deacons. These men being African American in the 1960's, for the most part were unlearned, custodians, truck drivers, and factory workers during the week however, on Sunday morning they seemed to be transformed into something more. It was as if they were able to peer through some luminous darkness, and catch a fleeting glimpse of the Divine Presence. The bible declares that, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5:16b NRSV).

These powerful prayers, which had encouraged the faithful to stay the course through many a storm, are unfortunately lost in the abyss of time. Therefore, I have decided to pursue a project that will focus on the writing of prayers as a spiritual discipline, which may help African American churches preserve the effectual prayers of the righteous.

THE JOURNEY

Although, church was enjoyable as a youngster, my love and affection of the formal worship experience diminished. It is a common occurrence during the teenage

and young adult years, less priority is placed on church attendance. Studies have shown that when teenagers and young adults have the opportunity on whether to attend church services or not, often they have chosen not to attend. “Life Way Research released study results that showed that more than two-thirds of young adults who attend a Protestant church stopped attending church regularly (at least twice a month) for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.”¹⁰

There are various reasons why young adults leave the church, some simply wanted to take a break, while for others, life changes seem to be at the top of the list. Many young people continue to love God however, attending college, military service, or starting a family has shifted their priorities away from worship services. Although some still wanted to attend church, 22 percent said they "became too busy" and 17 percent "chose to spend more time with friends outside the church."¹¹

As for me, I can attribute all of the above reasons for my departure from the church. Upon graduating high school, I enlisted in the United States Air Force, where I proudly served nine years. During my tenure in the military, I married and began a family. Several factors such as being removed from my home church, and the anxiety of finding a new church became excuses to stay away. I began to realize the longer one stays away from church, the easier it is to justify the absence. Falling into the trap of theological individualism, I began to rationalize my absence from church as countless others had by saying, “I do not have to attend church to worship God.”

¹⁰ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-reasons-why-young-adults-quit-church-28813/>(accessed Dec. 2, 2013).

¹¹ Ibid.

Fortunately, as is sometimes the case, negative life experiences, can lead to positive spiritual results. I returned to formal worship, with a deeper love for God and greater appreciation for the church. Statistics show that, “Most church dropouts, however, aren't gone for good. Among those who stopped attending church regularly and who are now ages 23-30, 35 percent currently attend church twice a month or more. Another 30 percent attend church more sporadically.”¹²

I continue to engage in a loving symbiotic relationship with the Baptist church, blessed to serve a congregation as pastor for the past seventeen years. The worshippers have allowed me the latitude and freedom to pursue an advanced degree, to not satisfy, but increase my curiosity about Christ. The opportunities to attend prestigious seminaries that are predominately African American were available to me, and had I attended, the experience would have been thought provoking and enriching. Interestingly, I decided to attend Drew Theological School not because of its sterling reputation, nor academic standing among seminaries, I chose Drew because of the ethnical, cultural, and denominational diversity. Enrollment in a class comprised of students belonging to several denominations with vastly different views is commonplace. However, Drew presented a challenge to me not because it is better, but because it is different.

TRADITION

A product of the African American Baptist tradition, prayer is and has always been an intricate component of the worship experience. There is an old saying in the African American religious community, “Prayer changes things.” I can vividly recall the

¹² <http://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-reasons-why-young-adults-quit-church-28813/>(accessed Nov. 23, 2013).

deacons of my youth, praying so passionately that I believed the Divine Presence of God dwelt among us. The deacons appeared to be in close relationship with God, and were able to present earthly experiences to the Heavenly God. As they prayed I could imagine God high and lifted up, as the angels surrounded the beatific throne (my childhood pastor always used that expression), of the Most High. It was a most wonderful experience.

Traditionally, prayers in the African American Baptist Church are rendered extemporaneously, as opposed to the written form of prayer in other denominations. “A spontaneous offering of prayers is understood to be evidence that God initiates and carries the prayer forth.”¹³ These prayers often are heartfelt emotional petitions, which reflected the zeitgeist of a common cause or condition. The poignant pleas of spirit to a God that is a discerner of our hearts, embrace not only African American church tradition, but African tribal tradition as well. Not unlike preaching and music, the prayer tradition of African American worship is rooted in Africa, and remains a vital force of spiritual fulfillment and liberation. Embracing and honoring tradition and ritual, which has generationally been a beacon of hope in the darkness of despair, is admirable however, can those very things hinder our relationship with the Divine Presence?

“Religious practices do not necessarily emerge out of beliefs. Instead, things are done for all kinds of reasons-some having to do with habit or tradition, others with style or aesthetic preference.”¹⁴ Just what is meant by religious tradition and ritual? I consider tradition as an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior

¹³ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 106.

¹⁴ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 39.

(as a religious action or social custom). Traditions differ from rituals in that rituals are often a byproduct of a tradition. “A ritual is a chain of symbolic behaviors prescribed by tradition. Everyone knows it must be performed under certain circumstances, and in the correct order, and everybody seems to know what the point of it is.”¹⁵ Frankly, many traditions in the church, have taken on a life of their own. Traditions such as, women having their head covered in worship, or the prohibition of women wearing pants have themselves become holy, instead of directing those who worship towards the Holy. Sadly, for many in today’s church, a tradition is something that been practiced for a long time, and often those who have practiced it have forgotten why.

CHANGING A MINDSET

Traditions and rituals are but a few of the many reasons for the exodus from mainline churches, lengthy liturgies, unemotional preaching, outdated hymns, and political ideology are factors as well. Statistics indicate that many, who had once worshipped in traditional mainline churches, are leaving to attend non-denominational Word Churches and Worship Centers, which have shifted their focus from a traditional to a more contemporary form of worship. “Everyone knows that the so-called mainline church is now the sideline...it isn’t because people have left the church, it is because people have left those churches.”¹⁶

Although I worship under the Baptist church umbrella, I continually attempt to find worshipful ways to make mainline church relevant to today’s worshipper. These

¹⁵ Don Cupitt, *What is a Story* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1991), 109

¹⁶ Michael DeGroote, “*The Rise of the Non’s: Why Non-Denominational Churches are Winning Over Mainline Churches*,” *Deseret News*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.deseretnews.com>. (accessed Nov. 25, 2013).

changes may be as simple as dressing casually to having a praise band and contemporary music during Sunday morning service. I continue to consider myself a postmodern/traditionalist. Realizing that this may be oxymoronic at best, I will clarify this statement to the best of my ability. The term *Via Negativa* is defined as, “the way we often identify ourselves. In other words, we know that we are not this or not that even if we cannot positively state what exactly we are.”¹⁷ I enjoy the movements of the church and revere them as being ordained by God. However, since becoming a student at Drew, my perspective has changed slightly. By embracing the concept of story, which does not focus on cause and effect, or examining component pieces, a realization that community provides the context of experience has expanded my framework of interpretation.

Part of our curriculum for the Master of Divinity degree was a course, “Writing for Worship,” led by Professor Heather Elkins. Until this time, the only part of my worship experience that was written was the scripture and sermon, but never the prayer. However, using the Lawrence Stooky’s, *Let The Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray In Public*, we were given the opportunity to write prayers for worship. One of the most difficult assignments for theological students is to prepare various forms of prayers in writing. Through this course, I began to view what I call church in another way, and to analyze what happens during the worship experience through a different lens. I began to listen more intently to the prayers being offered on behalf of the congregation in the communal worship, and discovered that they did not necessarily convey the sentiment of the people, or that they sometimes missed the mark of the occasion. This caused me to ponder, how could we capture the essence of the moment, be theologically

¹⁷ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Indian University Press, 2006), 25.

and doctrinally sound, and still move the congregation to worship. It is not my faith experience however to write prayers.

Many worshippers, whom attend predominately African American churches, possess a negative attitude towards writing prayers for worship. The prevailing concern is that written prayers, lack of sincerity and spontaneity, of the traditional extemporaneous prayers from the past. I asked myself, could the type of prayer, designed to meet nineteenth century challenges, fully express the needs and desires of worshippers in the twenty-first century? I began to explore the possibility of having those who pray, write the prayers that were to be used in the worship experience. Understanding the mindset of my religious tradition, which for the most part believes that, “Prayers printed in the bulletin to be prayed (or read) together by the congregation have little appeal to many Black worshippers,”¹⁸ I had to find a way to make writing prayers palatable to the congregation, without belittling or diminishing our traditional faith experience.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theologically reflecting upon the situation, spiritual revelation finally opened me to the possibility of viewing prayer as story. Spiritual revelation is inextricably linked to the spiritual gift of discernment, which is the ability through the Holy Spirit to distinguish between truth and error. In addition, spiritual revelation allows the Divine Presence to bring to light, those things that had previously been hidden. “Theological reflection can be framed by identifying the sources of revelation which lead to insight and theological

¹⁸ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 107.

understanding.”¹⁹ Not only was prayer to be a vehicle to carry our petitions to an Almighty God, in addition prayer could be used to chronicle the story of a people, engaged in a struggle between flesh and faith. The quadrilateral method provided greater latitude within the critical conversations of the narratives, which may not have been possible by solely relying on the experiential traditions of the Baptist church. Applying the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to frame the narrative using the criteria of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, we can begin to identify the hand of God, as it moved within the lives of the people. Using this quadrilateral approach, we can enter into “Critical conversation that takes place at the intersection of the multiple narratives surrounding a particular contemporary situation nestled in a particular ministry context.”²⁰

Therefore, a transformative type of reasoning, which transcends basic cause and effect, or linear thinking, needed to be employed. The old paradigm of reductionism, which championed the idea that one could understand the whole by examining smaller and smaller pieces, that when reassembled, would explain the whole is discarded. For centuries, theologians have employed the deductive or inductive form of reasoning, to reflect theologically. Deductive reasoning is a basic form of valid reasoning. Utilizing a cause and effect rational, beginning with the general statement or hypothesis and moving to the specific in an effort to deduce a conclusion. In order for deductive reasoning to be valid, the hypothesis must be correct. Thomas Oden, a professor emeritus of systematic theology at Drew believes, “That deducing the wisdom of the centuries from the works of

¹⁹ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Indian University Press, 2006), 53.

²⁰ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Indian University Press, 2006), 52.

our pre-modern theological forbears in the church will overcome what he deems the errors and erosions of contemporary Christian faith practices.”²¹

In contrast to the deductive form of reasoning, inductive reasoning uses specific observations and makes broad generalizations. However, this type of reasoning is flawed because inductive reasoning does not form concrete conclusions, rather it relies on probability. For example, if a person were to put their hand into bag containing cookies, and pulls out five chocolate chip cookies, they may conclude that all the cookies in the bag are chocolate chip. Although, this may be a logical conclusion, it may not however be true.

The reasoning method most suitable in helping one comprehend this narrative is abductive reasoning. This method is often used by doctors to form a diagnosis, and by jurors who make decisions based on the evidence presented to them. Abductive reasoning is a method of theological communication in which, “The discourse of the communicator seizes the imagination of people and transports them from their current thought and imagined world to another, with transformative results.”²² The word abduct in itself, would indicate that one would be carried away, or captivated by its use. “Abduction is a mode of fiction rather than logic. It is neither deductive nor inductive...It is sensory. The intellect’s intuitive quest for a true picture of the world is served a sensory banquet in the form of stories that relate human experience.”²³ The ability of

²¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), x.

²² Leonard I. Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, “A” *Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 31-33. 56.

²³ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Indian University Press, 2006), 58.

Jesus to use parables to capture the imagination and attention of his listeners is a prime example of abductive reasoning. Jesus' use of earthly stories, which reflected the human condition to alter the listener's worldview, led to transformation and regeneration. Therefore, by using abductive reasoning and a narrative approach to the writing of prayers, transformation, which is a perceptible change usually for the better may occur.

By becoming participants in the spiritual discipline of writing prayers, clergy and lay people alike can take responsibility for their own spirituality and public worship. So often, churchgoers depend on the prayers of others to guide them through difficult situations and circumstances, neglecting the opportunity to seize the moment to communicate with the Divine Presence. Therefore, it is vitally important for all to take ownership of their private as well as public prayer life, which in turn may give one a more comprehensive experience of the fullness of God.

I would hope that my apprehension is not misunderstood to esteem the writing of prayers over the oral tradition. This shift towards writing prayers need not come at the expense of the oral tradition they can coexist. However, given the more complex variety of concerns facing African American worshippers, the writing of prayers as a spiritual discipline, may help focus our pleading and praise before God. The overriding mission of overcoming the tension, which exists between extemporaneous and written prayers, is essential, if written prayers are to become part of the fabric, in the African American worship experience.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH HISTORY

My current appointment to pastoral ministry began in 1997, when I was called to serve as the senior pastor of the Roger Williams Institutional Baptist Church. The Church is located in Passaic, New Jersey, with a congregation that is predominately African American. In addition, we also have several Afro-Caribbean worshippers hailing from Trinidad, Bahamas, and the United States. Our church is in its 86th year of existence. The church has been a model of consistency, having only five pastors during this period. The Reverend Dr. S. A. Donnell organized and became the initial pastor of the church in 1927.

The term “Institutional,” in the church name is often misconstrued by some as simply meaning mainline or denominational. The term Institution Church is difficult to define. While rendering an opinion on a pornography case in 1964, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of obscenity that, he was not certain he could define it, “But I know it when I see it.”¹ I am not comparing the institutional church to obscenity but the point is the same, we know the institutional church when we see it, but have a hard time defining it. The best definition of institutional church I can give is, at its most fundamental level, is the most visible and culturally recognizable manifestation of organized religion, which finds its primary definition and purpose in weekly Sunday morning services. In addition, the church as an institution can equip worshippers for

¹ Paul Gewirtz, On “*I Know It When I See It.*” The Yale Law Journal 105. No.4 (1996): 1023

ministry, provides sound teaching, and gives believers the opportunity to utilize their collective resources to affect the community.

The Institutional Baptist church was established upon the model of the Social Gospel movement, which flourished in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The champion of this movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a Christian theologian and Baptist pastor. In the twilight of the 19th century, Rauschenbusch became very disturbed by the widening gulf between the haves and the have not's. Big business tycoons, corrupt government agencies, and general apathy towards the poor had all but soured the milk of human kindness. Rauschenbusch believed that the church had strayed from the teachings of Jesus, and his vision of the Kingdom of God. His vision was "The Kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals into heaven, but transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."³

Rauschenbusch's philosophy was to mobilize Christians in the United States to work towards a more just society for all, especially the urban working class. In his book Rauschenbusch reveals, "Christ's conception of the Kingdom of God came to me as a new revelation. Here was the idea and purpose that had dominated the mind of the Master himself... I found ... this new conception ... strangely satisfying. It responded to all the old and all the new elements of my religious life."⁴ The nationally renowned pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, Harry Emerson Fosdick is quoted as saying,

³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1907).

⁴ *Ibid*, 82

“The book struck home so poignantly on the intelligence and conscience ... that it ushered in a new era in Christian thought and action.”⁵

The hope of a more fair and equitable society resonated with African Americans however, they would discover, again they were not included. The deconstruction of the Reconstruction era in 1876, and its replacement system of apartheid in the North and Jim Crow in the South, prevented African Americans from participation and inclusion in Rauschenbusch’s vision of the Kingdom of God. Social, political, and economic oppression continued to be a part of everyday life for millions of African Americans. Eventually, the Social Gospel movement, which was never widespread in white Baptist churches, would dissolve among white protestant leaders and worshippers. However, a new champion of the Social Gospel movement would arise in the African American Methodist Episcopal Church, in the person of the Reverend Reverdy Ransom.

In 1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, opened Hull House, named after the buildings first owner, to provide transitional and social services to European immigrants who came to settle in the city of Chicago. So influential was Addams work with women and immigrants that in 1931 she won the Nobel Peace Prize. As a Bishop in the AME church, in 1900, Ransom formed the Institutional Church and Social Settlement (ICSS), a kind of Hull House for Chicago's black community, and the first settlement house in the country owned and operated by African Americans. W. E. B. Du Bois called it the "most advanced step in the direction of making the church exist for the people rather than the people for the church."⁶ The ICSS offered among its services day care for the children of

⁵ Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/activists/raushenbusch>

⁶ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3468300612.html>

working mothers, a gymnasium, various classes in practical crafts as well as music, men's clubs, women's clubs, Bible study groups, and an employment bureau.

Rev. Donnell, captivated by the idea of an institutional church organized the Roger Williams Institutional Baptist Church, with a vision of holistic ministry. Upon establishing the church, they soon purchased property upon which a tennis court, gymnasium, and ball fields would be built. In addition, a vibrant social service ministry was commissioned to provide employment, medical, and economic assistance to individuals who were disenfranchised, marginalized, and otherwise excluded from local, state, and national organizations designed to give aid. The church was built on a firm faith in Christ, self-empowerment and the strength of the family as a unit.

We continue to consider ourselves a family church. The description of a “family church” is one that is comprised of extended family members. The family unit may be different from in the past, with many single parent households and strong patriarchal leadership mostly absent nevertheless, these are the ties that bind. The daughter and immediate family of Dr. Donnell are still faithful participating members of the church today.

THE PROMISED LAND

My parents were not native to New Jersey, but as many others, migrated from the south to pursue the American Dream that seemed unattainable in the south. They relocated to New Jersey as part of what became known as the Great Migration. “The Great Migration generally refers to the massive internal migration of Blacks from the South to urban centers in other parts of the country. At the beginning of the 20th century, 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South. Between 1910 and 1970, an

estimated 6 million Blacks left the South.”⁷ Between 1910 and 1930, cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland saw their African-American populations grow by about 40 percent, and the number of African-Americans employed in industrial jobs nearly doubled. This exodus happened in two stages, the first began in 1910 until 1940, the second from 1940 thru 1970. The majority of the members in the Roger Williams Baptist Church are children of the Great Migration, having their religious and social roots in the South.

Several factors led to this massive migration. Initially, because of the United States involvement in what President Woodrow Wilson described as “The war to end all wars,” many skilled and unskilled workers enlisted in the military, and subsequently deployed to the European theater. Many blacks seeking freedom and independence, better wages, and educational opportunities for their children, took advantage of the labor shortage and moved north. The railroad system, which had traditionally carried cotton and other raw materials from the South to the industrial north, now carried a distinctly different cargo. I had often wondered why the majority of blacks in the Northeastern states, tended to have roots in the Carolinas or Georgia, while those in Chicago and Detroit tended to be from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The Pennsylvania Railroad in the East and the Illinois Central Railroad in the Midwest, were the iron horses that made the migrations possible.

There is a saying that you can take a person out of the country, but you cannot that the country out of the person. Those that migrated from the south brought their traditional rural worship style with them. This style consisted of metered hymns such as

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020> (accessed Dec. 7, 2013).

“Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,” also songs of mystery and wonder, “Hide Behind The Mountain Where The Chilly Wind Don’t Blow.” In addition, hand clapping and foot stomping were required, along with the famous melodious whooping style of preaching, which would precipitate an ecstatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Worship included a total body, for some it seemed, an out of body experience, which included shouting, dancing, crying, and even in some cases ecstatic utterances. These physical and emotional signs were necessary for a person to truly “have church.” Using a southern expression, one of the vehicles used to “prime the pump” for this style of worship was the extemporaneous prayers of the saints.

The average Sunday morning attendance in our church is 100-125 people, although we have over 250 that claim membership. The demographic breakdown of the congregation is a microcosm of the typical urban society. A recent survey conducted of the church body concluded, the majority of those whom worship consistently are single women with children. The ratio of women to men is 10:1. The numbers of married couples also lags behind at an even greater rate. Senior citizen members, who at one time comprised a majority in the church, have seen their numbers decrease. Unfortunately, the fastest growing segment of the congregation is the unemployed and underemployed. “In October 2013, the African Americans unemployment rate rose to 13.4 percent, while the unemployment rate for Hispanic Americans was 9.4 percent, and 6.7 percent for White Americans according to figures released by the U. S. Department of Labor...the national unemployment rate is 7.3 percent.”⁸ The reality behind these staggering figures further emasculate and diminish the hope of an embattled community. However, those who

⁸ <http://www.bet.com/news/national/2013/11/08/october-black-unemployment-rate.html>.(accessed Dec. 7, 2013).

attend services have committed themselves to seeking God, regardless of social location and status.

The educational and economic diversity within the church also is reflective of the greater community. There are several members with college and advanced degrees, as well as those who may not have finished high school. Although, urban economic difficulties have left some with little or no opportunities for employment, others seem to do quite well. Our congregation has several educators, engineers, social workers and others who are professionally employed. We have a vibrant Scholarship Ministry, which endows scholarships to our members attending college, in addition provides incentives and encouragement for our youth to excel. Fortunately, the amalgamation of those that have and others who have less has strengthened the bond of Christian love within the body of believers. However, though there is unity, an undercurrent of tension exists. The genesis of the tension revolves around the worship style of the church.

Although, most members are generations removed from the Great Migration, many still prefer a traditionally southern type of worship, which is believed to be more spiritual. The reasons some are convinced that the more traditional or southern style worship is more spiritual are varied. There are those who believe that if this type of worship was good enough for their ancestors, then it is good enough for them. Second only to the salvific work of Christ on the cross, the liberation of the children of Israel from Egypt, is perhaps the most important biblical story to African Americans. The biblical emancipation story of the Israelites has served as the motivation and strength, which elicits an expressive and participatory praise and worship that has helped liberate a people from physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual bondage.

Conversely, others prefer a more post-modern worship experience, which they contend to be more cerebral. The influx and popularity of some television evangelists have expanded or perhaps contracted the spiritual horizon for many worshippers. In addition, the emergence of the megachurch, coupled with the use of technology such as video monitors, web streaming, and live simulcasts, has given some the opinion that the local church has been left behind. “A megachurch is defined as a non-Catholic congregation with at least 2,000 attendees. Nearly all were established after 1955.”⁹

Some fear that a move from the traditional worship experience, will compromise the foundation upon which the church was founded. The conundrum as is presently constructed is how to incorporate a post-modern worship experience, into a southern worship style. My vision of a post-modern worship experience may differ from an established definition, which by some reduces post-modernism to relativism, believing that all truth is relative. I envision a post-modern worship experience as one that does not attempt to apply 19th century solutions to 21st century problems. The world has changed, although the Bible declares that “There is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9),” the problems of this present age requires a theological perspective that is applicable for today’s worshipper. This spiritual dilemma is embedded into the DNA of our church.

A BYGONE ERA

As the leadership of our church continues to grapple with the tension between a move towards post-modernism, and remaining rooted and grounded in tradition and ritual, we will be well served to identify some causative factors. Being a family church, there are many worshippers who remember the glory of days gone by. Whenever there is ebb

⁹ Gabriel Lischak, “*The Rise of The Megachurch*,” The Real Truth, September 2013, <http://www.realtruth.org> (accessed Nov. 26, 2013).

in church attendance, or a program is deemed unsuccessful, it is not unusual to hear one of our seniors or other longtime attendees, wax poetic about the past. I cannot count the times when people have extolled the virtues of my predecessors, in contrast with the present situation. No one can resurrect the past, however, some choose to use the past as an indictment on current ministry.

I will admit, I too remember when all of our local churches were filled. There was no shortage of willing churchgoers who valued the worship experience, and had a healthy reverence and respect for God and Church. Many of the worshippers were yet first generation southerners, who respected the Sabbath and kept it holy. Sunday worship was not reserved for morning services only, afternoon services were normal occurrences. Church was the cornerstone of life, and most activities revolved around the church. Then Wednesday was set aside for prayer meeting, which could last for hours. Young people participated in choir, went to Sunday school, and attended BTU (Baptist Training Union) classes, to teach them how to be a good Baptist.

However, the current paradigm has shifted beginning in the late 1980's and continuing to the present. An economic shift has changed the demographic makeup. The closing of local factories precipitated the loss of employment, and consequently the relocation of many worshippers that were the bedrock of the local churches. Ironically, this shift has led many African Americans to participate in what I term as reverse migration. Numerous corporations have moved their base of operations to southern states, and many blacks have followed leading to a population shift. As a result of the economic downturn, this town once a thriving community of African Americans and European

immigrants began to become inhabited by immigrants of Latin decent who also languish under the yoke of the economic downturn.

The influx of Latin Americans in neighborhoods that had once been inhabited by African Americans shifted the membership from those who could walk to church, to a community church in a commuter society.

“Someone who commutes to church is anyone who does not live within walking distance of their church. In a predominantly commuter church, the majority of members are generally not people that live in the local community of the church, but tend to drive to the church from somewhere else. They may know some of the local people but not usually at any depth.”¹⁰

The days of sending children to Sunday school or church is past; our church consists of many members who live more than twenty five miles away. This shift has negatively affected youth ministries and bible studies. In addition, Sunday afternoon services have been adversely affected because, when members drive home after service, they are not inclined to journey back to church.

Secondly, individualism and spiritual apathy has replaced a sense of community and spiritual awareness. People are sometimes so immersed in their personal struggle; they cannot recognize that others are struggling also. The ebb of the Civil Rights Movement left a leadership void for African Americans. Since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, two generations have been born that did not have direct contact with the civil rights struggle. As a direct result, the African American community has become fragmented pursuing individualism over community. “Black churches were not spared in the fragmentation of the African American community,”¹¹ resulting in declining

¹⁰ <http://www.unconcoiousstreaming.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/church> (accessed Dec. 3, 2013).

¹¹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology For Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 60

attendance and challenges to the church's position of leadership within the community. The desire to assimilate into mainstream American society has caused tension between the church and community. "The prominence of American individualism in the black religious culture, most vivid in evangelicalism, subverted mutuality between black churches and their communities."¹² The bottom line is that the church does not hold the same priority in the lives of its worshippers, or the community at large. I am convinced that American individualism has disrupted the theological understanding of the African American social and religious community.

This is the current state of my ministerial context. Some ministers may view their context only as their local congregation however, I believe that to effectually minister to a congregation, one must minister to a community. Whether the church is a commuter or community church, those who participate in its worship, have family and friends that are members of the community, but may not be part of the congregation. Therefore, it is important for the church to be an agent of change within the community of which it resides. Members of the community often ask, "Where is the church," because traditionally, the church has carried the torch as an agent of change. Unfortunately, all too often the church has been silent.

What I have shared thus far in this paper, may be well beyond the scope of my project idea however, the need to socially reflect and give a brief history of the crucible of conflict in which I minister was necessary. The dynamics of my personal conflict regarding being a pastor in my hometown are major factors in how I live out my vocation

¹² Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology For Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 60.

as pastor. The winds of change such as the evolution of our church from a community to a commuter church, the economic downturn of the region, and the nostalgic longing for the past are factors that are beyond my control, which has shaped my ministry context.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND PERSPECTIVE

For the believer, there is a distinct and undeniable correlation between prayer and life changing occurrences. The unwavering faith in the power of prayer continues to be a motivating and sustaining force for the believer. Whenever someone testifies to the effects of prayer upon their personal situations or circumstances, those present in worship respond with a resounding amen. This saying is so entrenched into the psyche of the community that even those who do not attend church, affirm this belief. The reality of prayer is evident in that because of the prayers of the righteous God has dealt kindly with saint and sinner, looking beyond their faults to meet their needs.

Prayers working in harmony with effective preaching, songs of hope, and an indomitable faith have provided buoyancy on stormy seas. This is evident in the fact that African Americans throughout the history of this country had been dehumanized, denigrated, and denied basic human rights, but continued to endure. This generational disenfranchisement is not limited to the slavery era, but is a thread that has weaved itself through years of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and The Civil Rights movement and is still prevalent today. Therefore, as strangers in a barren land, prayer was the vehicle, which continued to provide change and hope to a seemingly hopeless situation. Just as the captives in Egypt prayed for a Deliverer, worshippers today understand prayer to be a tool for deliverance.

It seems today that people are seeking change on a daily basis; however, they become constantly frustrated because they do not understand how to bring this desired change about. The pressures of living in the 21st century leads many to seek guidance and direction. The anxieties of securing adequate employment, financial security, fulfilling relationships, and sexuality has given rise to questions that people are not equipped to answer. Some, raised in a religious environment, now harbor doubts about the validity of their beliefs. Others have abandoned established religions altogether in favor of self-empowerment, prosperity, pleasure and various forms of spirituality outside of established religions. Still others have resorted to prayer, only to become disillusioned with God and the Church, when their prayers seemingly remain unanswered.

Prayer is a learned behavior and action. In the biblical record, we find these words, “Lord teach us to pray as John (The Baptist) taught his disciples (Luke 11:1).” This is a very powerful and intimate request. It is powerful because the disciples had seen the power of prayer in the life of Jesus, and had a desire to pray as he did. They had been eyewitnesses, as Jesus prayed over two fish and five loaves of bread then fed the multitude. During the final days of Jesus’ life on earth, the Bible describes, that he prayed so fervently and was in such agony that “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground (Luke 22:44).”

The request was intimate because of the cherished relationship shared between Jesus and the Father, in which the disciples wanted to participate. In fact, the celestial relationship between the mortal Jesus, and immortal God was so intimate that Jesus was propelled to profess, he and the Father are one, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9b).” This most endearing response of Jesus to his followers, which is

known to many as the Lord's or Model Prayer is emblazoned in the heart of believers worldwide

“Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen (Matt.6:9-13 KJV)

It is virtually impossible to practice something we have never learned. Prayer was an indispensable component in the spiritual formation of Jesus, therefore, it should be just as essential to the spiritual growth and formation of every Christian. Spiritual formation is a process by where people avail themselves to the presence of God, on an intentional and regular basis. Through prayer and contemplation on the Word of God, direction, purpose, and discipleship are sought. An intimacy of spirit, which can transcend carnal comprehension, is possible by spending quality time with God. In order to know someone intimately, time must be spent in his or her presence. Spiritual formation is a practice, and as with any other discipline, it should become second nature. I am an avid golfer, though not a good one, however, my instructors often talk of a process called muscle memory. When the action of the swing is repeated constantly, the body intuitively performs this action with little or no cognitive thought. Spiritual formation when repeated daily can become an indispensable lifeline to the Divine Presence of God.

A key component to spiritual formation is the communicative action of prayer. Just what is prayer? Unfortunately, many Christians would diminish the purpose of prayer by simply defining prayer as asking something from God. Prayer is so much more than that. “Certainly requests for ourselves or for others are an important part of prayer. But before and beyond that, there is prayer that asks for nothing whatsoever, but simply

praises the grandeur and goodness of God.”² For a Christian, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to God’s will, in the name of Jesus.”³

Numerous scriptures have been dedicated to the practice and purpose of prayer however, often neglected is the cautionary prescription given in 1 John 5:14, “And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”

Prayer can be defined as a desire directed towards God. “Prayer is simply the turning of the soul to God.”⁴

Therefore, when Jesus instructs his disciples in the Model Prayer, their souls became exposed to The Almighty. Prayer strengthens the divine relationship between Creator and creation. Jesus had given his followers a very simple template, teaching them how to pray. However, if it were so easy, everyone would be doing it. Why then is prayer so difficult? Why is it that people do not know how to pray, or what to pray? Is it perhaps that many of the faithful approach prayer as a “Get out of jail free card,” to be used only in cases of emergency? Many people do not pray until danger looms, financial disaster is imminent, or afflicted with illness.

Unfortunately, many among the faithful do not participate in a personal daily practice of prayer. I am often requested by members of the congregation to pray for a loved one in the hospital, family members taking a trip, relatives in the Armed Forces, or just to pray that God would intervene and solve an existing or pending problem. When asked if they had communicated to God personally, many have admitted that they had not.

² Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 13.

³ L. Ronald Durham, *The Secret Power of Prayer* (Nashville, Tn: Townsend Press, 2000), 33

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

This reminds me of a story of a man who had little regard for prayer, who was one day fishing in stormy weather. He was confident in his abilities even though the storm intensified. However, because of the severity of the storm, the hull of the boat was breached and began taking on water. When he realized the boat was sinking he began to pray. It is my belief that, if prayer became part of our personal daily spiritual formation, the manifestations of our prayer requests would be more evident in our lives. Perhaps if we were more direct and intentional with the rendering of prayer, that satisfaction will replace frustration.

All too often, prayer is viewed as an individual pursuit, rather than a corporate one. However, prayer does not and should not be an either/or mission, but instead should be a both/and. Communication with the Divine Presence on an individual and cooperate level, denotes fellowship with God and humankind. People of faith today have become so individualistic that, many no longer feel the need to belong to a community. I have observed that even in the worship experience, there is little sense of community. There was a time in the not too distant past that at the end of a worship service, congregants would remain to fellowship with each other. Today, when the benediction is given, the ushers must transform into matadors, to prevent from being gored by worshippers desiring to make a hasty exit.

Many of the modern songs rendered in worship concentrate on the individual, rather than on God and the community of faith as a whole. Musical offerings such as Marvin Sapp's "Never Would Have Made It,"⁵ or "I Give Myself Away,"⁶ by William

⁵ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/marvinsapp/neverwouldhavemadeit.html>(accessed Dec5, 2013).

⁶ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/i-give-myself-away-lyrics-william-mcdowell.html>(accessed Dec.5, 2013).

McDowell, although melodic and introspective, are more I-centric than Christ-centric. I am often disappointed, listening to songs and prayers in worship that focus on personal temptation, trials, and tragedy rather than on the greatness of God. My hope is that someday someone in my community will finally ascend the “Rough Side of the Mountain,”⁷ and find victory in Jesus. I maintain the position that, if our focus is consistently on our situation, then we shall remain constantly disenchanting. The tunnel vision of personal crisis prevents people from having a panoramic view of what God is doing in the world, and is able to do in their lives. People are often immersed in their personal struggle; they cannot recognize that others are struggling also. Everyone has a struggle and story, that if incorporated into the community story, a greater work can be accomplished.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

By engaging the community in corporate prayer, my project will uncover the stories of the community, and by doing so, the congregation’s relationship with the Divine Presence will be strengthened. The story of the community is vitally important because, “Story is the way a community usually views, values, and talks about itself in relation to its world and heritage.”⁸ An evolving narrative makes it possible to explain and express the joys, sorrows, triumphs, and tragedies of the human condition. An evolving narrative is an unfolding of a story that is not particularly linear; by this, I mean that the story has no clearly defined lines. However, the story moves and unfolds gradually and in time, the story is not finite, but continues under construction, having

⁷ <http://www.ucaconline.org/images/monument/roughside.html>(accessed Dec.7, 2013).

⁸ Larry A. Golemon, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 5

various meanings to the hearers. The story of my congregation's prayers is mainly one of provision and protection. By realizing that God has brought them through difficult times in the past, the overwhelming sentiment is to petition and rely on God to provide all that is needed.

John Malcus Ellison's prayer, "Rekindle Our Sense of Wonder," written in 1961, is a shining example of prayer as a narrative. By engaging in the struggle with the community, Ellison was able to convey the hope of a successful outcome, and also the fear of losing sight of the vision during the Civil Rights Movement. As he closes the prayer, he entreats the Lord, "Oh, let not the wonder fade or the light become darkness, lest we lose our way."⁹ He is able to chronicle through prayer the story of the people and the gravity of the situation.

Storytelling is not new. African cultures past and present have had Griot's orally preserve the stories of the people. Storytelling has been an integral part of life in many cultures. Jewish parents are obligated to tell their children the stories of the Holocaust, imbedding the hope "Never Again." We take delight in stories, the fabric of our lives are told in a narrative format. I have often told my congregation, most of us have learned, and retained more of the Bible before age ten, because of the biblical stories shared with us by Sunday school teachers. The pleasure of stories then, "Is the pleasure of the metaphors that make us intelligent and the metonymies (the pursuit of meaning down a chain of signifiers), that enable us to live meaningful lives in time."¹⁰ In this present age,

⁹ John Malcus Ellison, "Rekindle Our Sense of Wonder," in *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*, ed. James Melvin Washington, Ph.D. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 209

¹⁰ Don Cupitt, *What is a Story* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1991), 15

we still incorporate the use of story to explain the complexities of life. “Moreover, there is a narrative structure of the Bible that unfolds in telling the Story of God, and the importance of the Story in shaping the character of people’s lives.”¹¹

Jesus was the greatest storyteller of all time. His skillful usage of stories or parables would bring to light spiritual truths that would otherwise go undetected. By using common ordinary examples, he was able to uncover extraordinary truths. Jesus’ ingenious illustrations, using familiar occupations and occurrences such as in the parable of the Sower, the Wheat and the Tares, and Good Samaritan, made the truth palatable for some and distasteful for others. Jesus in his infinite wisdom understood that an undisguised truth would harden the hearts of many listeners. There is a wonderful Jewish teaching story about truth:

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There she dressed Truth in story, warmed her, and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers’ doors and was readily welcomed into the people’s houses. They invited her to eat at their table and warm herself by their fire.¹²

Again, an evolving narrative makes it possible to explain and express the joys, sorrows, triumphs, and tragedies of the human condition.

As we continue to view the necessity of story and its relationship to prayer, whether cooperate or individual, we will discover two distinctions. One is the prevailing narrative and the other is the shadow story. The prevailing narrative is the most popular

¹¹ Anne E, Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 4

¹² Larry A. Golemon, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 27

and accepted story. This version is not challenged, largely because normally the individual or community is presented favorably. In this version, heroic acts are chronicled, and the outcome is usually predictable. Shadow stories are those stories that are not readily visible with the naked eye. These are the types of stories that are rarely mentioned to those outside of a community, because it may disturb or change the perception of a people, place, or event. At first glance, it would seem that everything is in order, however, upon further inspection, you may find an ominous and or uncomfortable reality. That reality may be one in which, those involved have suppressed and buried an event so deeply that it has been almost forgotten.

The history of the United States fits this category, the prevailing narrative is that the Founding Fathers were heroes and freedom fighters, unfairly treated and unjustly taxed by an oppressive government. Therefore, their rebellion against the oppressor was just and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was attained. The shadow story however, is one more ominous. It is a story of treason, insurrection, genocide, slavery, and oppression on the part of America's heroes. The fact that several of the Founding Fathers were slaveholders, and others participated in wars against Native Americans, to gain a strangle hold on the land goes untold, because it makes people uncomfortable. Lurking in the shadows is the truth that not all men were created equal and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, was not for everyone.

One of the aims of my project is to shed light on and uncover the shadow stories of my community. The Gospel of Jesus was one of reform and liberation, by unearthing these communal and individual shadow stories, my hope is that spiritual reform, and liberation will be attained. I believe that the writing of prayers as a spiritual discipline

will break the yoke of bondage and allow the writer the vehicle to expose him/herself fully to the Divine Presence.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Raised in a multicultural inner-city urban environment, diverse religious practices and cultures were not foreign to me. It was not strange for me as a child, to play with children of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Being part of an interfaith, multicultural community was the norm, not the exception throughout my primary and secondary education. However, as I reminisce, every year near the onset of spring, many of my classmates would have a black mark on their foreheads. As curiosity would have it, I asked a friend who was so marked, “what is the significance of the mark?” She gave me a quizzical look as though this was common knowledge, and then explained that on Ash Wednesday, the priest at their church makes the sign of the cross on their foreheads because they are entering the season of Lent.

I had heard of Ash Wednesday, and was aware that it is related to Easter, however, I had never known of its significance. I remember going home and asking my mother, “Why do we not get ashes smudged on our foreheads?” She responded that we do not practice that in the Black church, that only the Catholic Church does that. I have come to learn from friends that were Episcopalian that it was not only the Catholic Church, many Protestant denominations participate in this practice also, however, in my experience the African American Baptist Churches had not. I learned that Lent is a season of fasting, preparation, and repentance for the coming of Easter. This practice is not found in the

biblical record although the practice of communal repentance and mourning using ashes are chronicled.

The Roger Williams Baptist church, has been in existence for eighty-six years, sixteen of which, I have been the senior pastor. Prior to my tenure, the majority of the church was unfamiliar with the Lenten season, and had never observed it. However, over the years, we have incorporated Lent into our church liturgical calendar, and it has been embraced enthusiastically by the congregation. The observance of Ash Wednesday has become a permanent part of our liturgical calendar. Each year more people come to participate in prayer. The anointing with palm ashes continues to be the highlight of the worship experience, as we focus on the Lenten season. On Palm Sunday, we distribute palms to the congregation, the excess palms are stored at the church during the year for the purpose of being burned prior to the upcoming Lenten season, then they are used to anoint the participants during the Ash Wednesday worship service. The participants in our Lenten services are not exclusive to my church, each year Baptist worshippers from area churches have helped swell our numbers.

Each year our ministry team has attempted to discover ways to assist our congregation and community in refocusing and reframing the narrative of this most holy season. In preparation for Resurrection Sunday, one year on Maundy Thursday, I donned a towel and girded myself (John 13:4), to wash the feet of several members in the congregation. On another occasion, we had a candlelight prayer and dedication service where everyone wrote down at least one area of their lives in which they would like to be more committed.

In 2011, during my year-end state of the church assessment, I came to the realization that the prayer life of the church, particularly the Deacon ministry had become very repetitious. I began to notice that many of the prayers on Sunday repeated the same thought and pattern. These public prayers, which were designed to invite the presence of God into the worship experience, had become nothing more than personal pleadings that continued to miss the mark. It had gotten to the point that many in the congregation could almost pray along with the speaker. “As a leader of public prayer you are not being asked to utter your personal prayers in public, but rather to speak on behalf of the whole church.”¹ Something needed to be done. Addressing this concern, in 2012, our deacon ministry began a project of writing prayers from scripture using the Lawrence Stookey resource book, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen*. As we advanced in this project not only I, but also the congregation began noticing a difference in the prayers during worship. The prayers became more focused, and appropriate for the occasions. There was much less attention on personal needs and more towards the needs of the congregation.

PROJECT DESIGN

As I pondered various project ideas, the thought of writing prayers for worship began to take shape. Our church subscribes to the Daily Bread, which is a daily devotional of writings that are designed to encourage and spiritually uplift the reader. Each day different writers would expound on a theme, which is read daily. I began to imagine my congregation participating with a daily devotional. By committing ourselves to this writing project, we would:

¹ Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 11 .

1. Organize a Lenten Prayer Book.
2. Prepare our written prayers using a biblical foundation.
3. Engage in writing communal prayers for worship.
4. Begin a transition from an oral to a written tradition.
5. Establish a personal spiritual formation of writing prayers.

Being sympathetic of the prevailing narrative and attitude of many in the African American Baptist church of the artificial nature of written prayers, I was not naive in the resistance that might follow. The more realistic shadow narrative is quite possibly the fact that many within the congregation, are not comfortable with their ability to communicate via the written form. In addition, when trying to reshape cultural perceptions and identity, those whom you are trying to help may become envious, jealous, and resistant to change. I understood that there might be some pushback towards this project idea.

I prepared myself for negative comments and attitudes that might refer to my educational goals and aspirations. However, during one of my daily devotions, I meditated on the story of Abraham and Isaac. When told by God to sacrifice his long awaited son on Mt. Moriah, Abraham took Isaac and a host of others and began the journey. As they ascended to a certain level on the mountain, Abraham turned to his company and told them to stay here, while he and Isaac go on further. Then I realized that not everyone may be able to go on this journey with me, some just may not be ready. Hence, the project idea was solidified in my spirit: The writing of prayers in an African American Church.

Not only did I desire to initiate our membership into writing for worship, I wanted them to write from an African American cultural context and social location. Through this project, my plan is to initiate a transition in the expression of our prayers, from an oral tradition to a written legacy. Using the Bible as our foundation, we would design a daily devotional prayer booklet, which will focus on the Lenten Season. The Lenten Season has traditionally been a time of introspection, as we reflect upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Gleaning from the narratives of community and congregation, we would integrate the Lenten themes of atonement and sacrifice; with a people, whose souls continue to look up towards a faithful God, with steadfast hope. The fulfillment of our hope is to provide transformation of a people from a modernist expression of faith, to a postmodern awareness of the power and presence of the Almighty in their lives. In addition, our expectation is to enlighten worshippers to the importance of writing and recording prayers. This transition to a written tradition will not only provide a vehicle to address today's needs, but will also chronicle the historical narrative of the people for posterity.

The objective of this project was to engage the adult worshippers of the Roger Williams Baptist Church, in the writing of communal prayers, which would begin on the first day of the 2013 Lenten Season, and culminate on Resurrection Sunday. This project would seek to engage the church and community, in the writing of prayers for worship, and personal devotion. The Lay Advisory Team and I, intend to lead the community and congregation to:

1. An interpretation of scripture that facilitates a departure from the Western European theology of Atonement, to a Liberation theology of empowerment.

2. Spiritually nurture our congregation, which would positively affect our community.
3. Using the Lenten Season as our focal point, we would attempt to flesh out the narratives of the people, who walk by faith.
4. We juxtapose the written with the oral tradition, not to esteem one over the other, but to demonstrate various ways in which they can coexist.

As an intergenerational endeavor, we are sensitive to the cherished tradition of the denomination, as we explore avenues of transition.

The daily devotional project solicited forty-seven adult volunteers, from the Roger Williams Baptist Church, and community to write prayers for a Lenten Prayer Book. These volunteers correspond to the actual number of days of the 2013 Lenten season. Traditionally, Sundays are not included as days of Lent; however, for our purposes we felt it expedient to include them in our project. There will be forty-seven prayers in The Book; each prayer will correspond to a particular day of the week.

Moreover, each week of the Lenten season, has an appropriate theme assigned, i.e. atonement, reconciliation, self-sacrifice. The completed Lenten Prayer Book will be given to congregation/community by hard copy, or electronic media. The daily devotionals are to be read simultaneously by everyone at twelve noon, with the intended purpose of refreshing, refocusing, and recommitting ourselves to prayer. Each volunteer, will be given the awesome responsibility, and opportunity to participate by, writing a prayer.

The plan for The Project will unfold in several stages:

1. Workshops for the Lay Advisory Team to expose them to a reading of scripture, which will stretch them beyond the traditional denominational literal interpretation.
2. Workshops and presentations for the prayer writers, providing training in the Collect type of prayer, which is the preferred form by which the prayers will be submitted in the devotional.
3. The L.A.T., will participate in attentive listening exercises designed to prepare them to intently listen to the stories of the community.
4. Individual interviews that will be combined with pre and posttest surveys.
5. The publication of the book in hardcopy and electronic media form.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Having solidified the project idea, which is preparing a daily devotional prayer book, using biblical scriptures and the stories of those within the church and community, the next step was to design a way to not only implement the project, but also in addition uncover the methods to evaluate its results. Careful consideration was needed so that the methods chosen, will promote transformation among the participants. Transformation can be defined as, “A marked change, as in appearance or character, usually for the better.”² Realizing that the purpose of stories is to make life make sense, and that stories are theological in a fourfold sense, “Every story just by being a story constitutes a promise that life can be meaningful...convey a moral sense of a piece of practical wisdom about life...teach people by what values they should live...and define the identities of their own leading characters.”³

² Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 124.

³ Don Cupitt, *What is a Story* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1991), 77

To appreciate the people, the L.A.T., must understand the stories, not only what is on the surface, but the shadow and underlying stories, which I dare say are possibly more interesting than the prevailing narrative. Therefore, we maintained a professional demeanor at all times, as we attentively listened to the sensitive stories of the people. Realizing, that the stories contained in their prayers embody the promise of life, are meaningful, and define the identities of their character, the L.A.T. was careful to promote a compassionate spirit during the process. A project of this nature can be subjective, because the L.A.T and I must depend upon the honesty of the participants in the project.

In order to do this I came to the realization that a multiplicity of methods would be the best way to implement and subsequently evaluate the project. Conscious of the fact that one method would not be able to encapsulate the variety of stories and concerns, an approach that pursued an amalgamation of methods was needed. It was decided through much dialogue in our meetings that we could not bring our preconceived ideals, personal preferences, or prejudices into the process. Outward displays of displeasure, discomfort, or knee-jerk reactions would be detrimental to the objective of receiving honest and sincere narratives. It is imperative that we as a team remain as self-differentiated and non-reactive as possible. If we were truly going to listen and digest the stories of the participants, and move them towards an upward trajectory, we would have to assume a kenotic position. Savage and Presnell believe that to assume the kenotic position “The researcher empties her/himself of preconceptions, paradigms of interpretation, or presumptions about the stories that emerge”⁴

⁴ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 76.

Paramount to the success of the story gleaning process is the acceptance and recognition of differences in personalities, personal experiences, social locations, and cultural contexts.

Postmodern ministry research therefore affirms that addressing differences adds to learning and growth. Difference is not only tolerable, it is to be embraced, processed with patience and understanding, orchestrated by the leader into new configurations of community collaboration and ministry, and celebrated.⁵

Recognizing that differences are to be expected as researchers in this project, having a calm demeanor was important to insure a safe storytelling environment.

The ability to recognize differences in the storytelling environment takes effort on the part of the listener. To engage in an active listening process, the members of the L.A.T. were required to embrace an ethnographic mindset.

“Ethnography is a form of social research used by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars to study living human beings in their social and cultural contexts...immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them.”⁶

In order for those whom are sharing their narratives to feel comfortable in recounting intimate details and emotions, it is important for them to feel that the listener is somehow empathetic. Wimberley identifies this type of empathetic listening as “inliving,...When we listen compassionately, we show a genuine interest in the concerns and the sufferings

⁵ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 76.

⁶ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 25.

of others.”⁷ “Ethnographers who are working for transformation and hope must be open to being transformed, moved by the persons and stories that they encounter.”⁸

Upon researching the various methodologies available, I have decided that an ethnographic research method, which demands that, “The researcher becomes a participant observer, joining the faith community as a kenotic or empty, listener,”⁹ is ideally suited for this project. The ethnographic research method is a qualitative research method by which projects can be designed within congregations and communities in order to spark growth in personal and communal self-awareness.”¹⁰

This method used in conjunction with the story-linking process, encourages the participants to link their personal stories from an African American perspective, with biblical stories for developing a type of liberating wisdom. There are three primary stories that are integral parts of the story-linking process: “The stories of our everyday lives, the story of God and the good news of Jesus Christ in Scripture, and postbiblical Christian faith heritage stories, particularly those from the African American Christian faith heritage.”¹¹ These are the most suitable tools, which will allow the participants to become fully engaged in the project of Writing Prayers in an African American Church.

⁷ Anne E, Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 35.

⁸ Ibid., 109

⁹ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 108.

¹⁰ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4, 25.

¹¹ Anne E, Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 25.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Upon seeking direction from God through much prayer and meditation, and being confirmed and comforted in my spirit that this project would benefit church and community, I began the daunting task of putting the pieces of the puzzle together. Seeking where I should begin, I reasoned that the most obvious starting point was with my Lay Advisory Team. The L.A.T., would be crucial to the successful implementation of the project, therefore, deciding who would participate as part of the group was one of the most important decisions that had to be made. I prayerfully asked God to show me who would be best for the team; I did not want to depend solely upon my intellect, because our intellect is subject to fail us.

However, as I asked for spiritual guidance, there were some scholarly criteria for membership to this team that I believed was essential to reaching the objective, which is gleaned narratives from the congregation/community, and training the participants to utilize their stories in the writing of prayers. I believe that diversity is an important component for the L.A.T. Seeking just one type of individual such as those who possessed a college degree, would be detrimental because those who do not have a formal education, might feel that they were not regarded highly enough to serve. Membership on this committee was not based on academic achievements, but on a willingness to serve, and most importantly a genuine love of God and people. L.A.T., members were chosen

to serve, and most importantly a genuine love of God and people. L.A.T., members were chosen from various age groups with different life experiences. In so doing, The Project could be viewed from a panoramic, as opposed to a myopic lens. Taking into account all of the above criteria, I began to canvass my congregation/community for those God would identify to become L.A.T. members.

THE LAY ADVISORY TEAM

As leader, I carefully guided and monitored the L.A.T., as they carried out their responsibilities. Careful attention was paid to the input and sharing of ideas, and subsequent data collected during the planning and evaluation process. The L.A.T. was accountable for distributing, and collecting data through pre/post test surveys. The collected data was used for quantitative (questionnaires, surveys found in Appendices A and B) and qualitative (narratives, participant observation), purposes. In addition, the L.A.T., participated in attentive listening, identifying shadow stories, and prevailing narratives. Finally, we evaluated the congregation/community, demographically by age, education level, and gender. Evaluation by demographic categories was necessary to discover the affects of transformation across a broad spectrum, how much if any occurred, and if so, which groups were positively or adversely affected by The Project?

The persons that served on the Lay Advisory Team were:

- Sandra, Team Chairperson was the youngest person at 27, selected to participate on the team. She is a college graduate, with a degree in Social Work. Her experience working in group homes as well as her dedication to several ministries of helps within the church made her a prime candidate for the team. More than that, she has been a lifelong member of this church, and because of that, some in

the congregation continue to see her as a child instead of the young woman she has become. Therefore, for these reasons and more, I selected her to lead the team.

- Lashawn, Assistant Chairperson, is a mother of three teenage children, and recent college graduate. As a working mother, she realized the need to set the example for her children to return to college and complete her degree. Overcoming the challenges and obstacles of balancing work, raising children, and being an integral participant in several ministries, one of which includes being a Deaconess in training, she was well equipped to participate in this group.
- Ramona, Secretary, is a mother of two adult boys, and a high school graduate. She has also attended a local community college, earning a business systems certificate. She presently serves as a Deaconess in our church where her gifts of wisdom and helps, makes her value more than rubies. Keeping records, coordinating schedules, facilitating class materials, promoting and leading class discussions are some of the strengths, which she brings to the L.A.T. Without her copious note-taking many of the nuances of this project would have gone unmentioned. Foremost however, is her dependability, she rarely is too busy to lend a hand, and is an ever-present help.
- Curtis, Team Member, is a father of four, grandfather of two. Curtis is one of our more recent church members. He is a Supply Chain Supervisor with a major telecommunications corporation in New Jersey. He has recently returned to school to pursue a Bachelors Degree in business administration at a local college.

Curtis is a valuable asset to our church, serving as a mentor for young people, and is always willing to assist in any capacity needed.

- Shamara, Team Member, is married and a mother of four, grandmother of one. Shamara has an Associate's Degree in business, and is seeking an opportunity to complete her Bachelors Degree. She has been a county employee for twenty-one years. Shamara has been instrumental in recruiting and brainstorming ideas for our team. Many of the ways of the church are new to her; however, that same newcomer openness is one of her greatest assets.
- Sandra, Team Member, is a mother of two adult children, grandmother of two. Sandra is an educator in the local school system. She has a Masters Degree in Special Education, and is the longest tenured member of our church serving on this committee. She pre-dates my pastorate, and has been a first-hand witness to the transition that has taken place. She is a former Sunday School Superintendent and Deaconess. Her biblical knowledge is one of her strongest attributes, as well as the ability to organize and focus on a task.
- Carl, Team Member, is a high school graduate. I would refer to Carl as our everything man. Whatever you need he can do it. He is skilled in carpentry, metalworking, masonry, and possesses various other construction skills. He is currently in Deacon training, sings with the Male Chorus, and has a comedic alter ego. His low-key demeanor belies his great inner strength. His willingness to learn and be of service, along with his timely levity are great assets.

THE DETAILED PROCESS OF THE PROJECT

The Lay Advisory Team participated in several training workshops prior to the recruitment of volunteers. The workshops were adopted to prepare the Team for the task. The primary training resource was, “Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray In Public,” by Laurence Hull Stookey. This resource “reflects on the nature of prayer; discusses the forms, mechanics, and vocabularies of prayer; and provides concrete exercises in editing and writing prayers.”¹ I was exposed to this manual during a church at worship class during my Master of Divinity studies. Dr. Heather Elkins skillfully utilized the exercises in the book, to instruct the students in the various forms of writing prayers for worship. The book contains twenty-one exercises, which incorporates scripture as a foundation to assist in the writing of prayers. Exercise 5 in the Stookey manual is entitled, “Learning to Pray with Vigorous Verbs.”² Stookey uses the example of Jesus teaching the Disciples to pray, highlighting the vigorous verbs that gives the prayer power and passion.

TRAINING OF LAY ADVISORY TEAM

The first item on the agenda was to explain to the L.A.T. in as much detail as possible the purpose and scope of the project and the methodology to be implemented. The timetable as to when certain aspects of the project needed to be started and completed was discussed. However, during this initial session, the importance of this project to the life of our church and community had to be driven home. A brief handout

¹ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 11.

² *Ibid*, 27.

was given to each member containing information pertaining to writing for worship. Having the L.A.T. buy in to what we were trying to accomplish was essential for the project to take flight. Each team member was given a copy of the Stookey manual; we then set a date and time for our next meeting. Following this, we had prayer, with each person taking a turn to offer a petition to God for Divine guidance as we embarked on this project.

It was very important that the duties of the team were completely understood by the L.A.T., but especially the church at large. The bible uses a very appropriate and descriptive metaphor in 1 Peter 2:9, describing those in Christ as a peculiar people. This I have found to be a truism, church folk are a peculiar breed indeed. Therefore, it was crucial for me to explain the purpose of the L.A.T to the congregation. Just as I had shared with the team, I explained to the church that the L.A.T. was not a governing body within the church, which will take the place of the existing Joint Board. Neither is the team a decision making entity of the church. However, the team is in place to assist the pastor to implement and evaluate a project pertaining to my educational goals. In addition, the team's purpose is to be of spiritual assistance to every member of the church and community to enhance his or her individual and corporate prayer life.

Our initial training session had to be postponed several times, once due to inclement weather, another because of an unexpected death in our church family, however, despite the obstacles that seemed to persist, we were able to convene on November 13, 2012, which put us almost two months behind my original timeline. Thankfully, the right persons were chosen who were able to adjust to the change and

move forward. We all understood that we needed to make up for lost time, so with a unanimous consensus, we pledged to stay a little longer for each training session.

I had decided that initially the L.A.T. would focus on exercises 1, 2, and 3 in the workbook. Exercise 2 entitled, “Learning a Basic Form for Brief Prayers,” introduces the L.A.T., to the Collect form of prayer, which was the type of prayers preferred in the project. “There are five components contained in the Collect form of prayer, which are in order: Address, Attribution, Petition, Purpose, and Closing.”³ During this session, we practiced writing prayers, using this format. In addition, we discussed the grandeur of God, so that we may discover the God who exceeds our imagination. It was imperative for the success of this project, to find diverse ways of addressing and identifying the Divine Presence.

Realizing that time was not on our side I decided to break the L.A.T. into three separate groups, which maximized our time together. One group was assigned the survey questions, another choosing themes and scriptures for the written prayers, and the last group was in charge of developing a training module for the participants. I had already done some of the preliminary work necessary for the work to proceed. As they divided themselves into their groups, I spent time with each group to gauge the progress, share ideas that I had previously researched, and encourage them to persevere.

Sitting in with the survey group first, I presented them with copies of several online surveys, which I thought appropriate for the task. I explained to them that the purpose of developing a pre-test survey was to give us a baseline to access the prayer life

³ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 11 .

of the volunteer prayer writers. Of the many questions available to us, we narrowed the list of possible questions to seventeen, which we used to finalize our questionnaire. The responses to each question were presented on a scale of 1 thru 5. One of the drawbacks with surveys and questionnaires, especially in church is what I refer to as the “honesty factor.” Oftentimes respondents will give a response that they believe is desirable, regardless whether it is true or not. Therefore, we were very careful to assure the respondents of the confidentiality of the survey, and that there are no correct answers, so they could answer honestly.

After finalizing the survey questions, we turned our attention to the administration of the survey. One of the team members rightly acknowledged that we had not even identified volunteers to write prayers, so then how could we administer a survey. How could I miss that one? Of all the planning we had done, I had not shared with my committee my plan for recruiting volunteers. My initial plan was to ask for recruits when I had explained to the congregation the project and the purpose of the L.A.T. However, I had placed such importance on the explanation that I neglected to ask for volunteers. In retrospect, perhaps God realized that was not the right moment. I quickly assured them that I had a plan, and that plan was to ask for volunteers at the conclusion of the worship experience on Sunday. Problem solved, the volunteer list was swiftly filled.

I then turned my attention to the group charged with identifying the foundational scripture texts for each devotional writing. Prior to breaking out into groups, we determined that since the project focus was on the writing of prayers in the African American church, we should chose themes and scripture that would reflect the experiences of our people in this country. In my prospectus, I had already determined

that each week would have a different theme. Many different themes were suggested, some traditionally associated with the Lenten season, and others that were not.

We finally settled on seven major themes that would reflect the struggle and the triumph of African Americans in this country. The themes were 1. Brokenness, 2. Reconciliation, 3. Deliverance, 4. Faith, 5. Perseverance, 6. Liberation and 7. Guidance in that order. The order of the themes are important because we felt that each one, step by step, gradually pointed an upward trajectory toward the Divine Presence. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatian church identified nine Fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, and peace, which seem to be placed in a strategic order building one upon the other.

“In looking at Galatians 5:22, 23 it quickly becomes evident that by reserving the mention of self-control to last, the apostle Paul is deliberately emphasizing it as the capstone of all the graces of the Spirit. While the fruits reflect the maturing work of the Spirit in an individual’s life, they also become apparent in relationships with other people.”⁴

Having agreed upon the major themes, the decision was made to have sub-themes, in order to make the prayer book even more indigenous to the African American experience in this country. The sub-themes would be the embodiment of a people not easily broken; containing some colloquialisms indigenous to the Black Church and Black experience such as, God has not brought us this far to leave us.

After solidifying the themes and sub-themes, I moved to the group in charge of training the volunteers that wrote the prayers. This was a very important assignment, because the training was the impetus that facilitated a changing of a deeply imbedded cultural paradigm. The prayers published in this devotional had to be in conformity with the Collect form of prayers, which taken from the Stookey manual, they are in order:

⁴ Gary McGee, Self-Control. http://www.enrichmentjournal.ag.org/top/fruit9_selfcontrol.cfm (accessed Dec. 6, 2013).

Address, Attribution, Petition, Purpose, and Closing. Previously, the L.A.T., had discussed the possibility of some type of resistance by asking people to format their prayers in this manner. Prayer is a very personal and intimate practice therefore, to suggest a change may not be well received. Great care and caution was taken as we attempted to first instruct, and then initiate a cultural shift among a people with such a traditional orientation. We all understood that there would be some pushback by some, especially our “Seasoned Saints,” however; we were determined to convince them that church is not Burger King; you cannot always have it your way.

It was agreed upon by the group that a Power Point presentation would be developed, highlighting each of the five components of the Collect form of prayer, complete with examples. In addition, the presentation contained an explanation that the prayers for the book are not individual in scope, but are communal in nature. Personal pronouns such as I, me, and my should be avoided, and finally the big one, gender neutrality, all references to God as Father, Master, or King are unacceptable. As we made these pronouncements in our meeting, we simultaneously looked at each other and laughingly realized the complexity of our challenge. For many people, God as Father is all they have ever known therefore, asking them to find other terms of endearment for God would be like pulling teeth from a shark. Unearthing new and various ways to identify The Most High was indeed difficult, however, we had to bring people to the realization that “Our futures will be shaped by our imaginations.”⁵

We reconvened as a group “weary, worn, and sad,” to bring everyone up to speed on the total process. A brief synopsis of each group was presented to the committee as a

⁵ Mark Lau Branson, *memories, hopes, and conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA.: The Alban Institute, 2004), 40.

whole, and any suggestions were brought forth and noted. Then we began planning for our agenda for the next meeting, which took place after the Thanksgiving holiday. As we departed, I gave the team an assignment to be completed in the interim. Our take home assignment from this session was, to chose a scripture, and write a prayer in the proper Collect form, which is from exercise 2 in the Stookey manual.

The second training session for the L.A.T., began by reviewing the afore mentioned “take home assignment.” We ensured that the proper form was followed, and discussed the ease or the difficulty in writing a Collect prayer. Some of the members of the L.A.T had difficulty following the template for writing the prayers. We discovered something that we already knew, that old habits are difficult to break. Furthermore, a more pressing problem was exposed during the review of the prayer assignment. Each person was able to choose a scripture as the entry point into prayer, but several of the L.A.T members had encountered difficulty with interpretation. I understand that a Western European orthodox interpretation does not always coincide with an African American liberation experience; however, there should be some social, historical, or cultural context for interpretation. Some prayers that were written did not embody or reflect an understanding of the scripture used as the foundation.

If my committee was having difficulty with interpretation, I could imagine how others in the congregation/community would fare. I detoured from my planned agenda, to explain the various lenses through which one may look to present an acceptable translation of scripture. My desire was for them to develop the capacity to view scripture from a Christ-centric position, rather than an I-centric location. It is very acceptable to use imagination in the interpretation process, but imagination without Christ as our

foundation is fantasy. After a few exercises, things began to appear clearer for those who encountered the difficulty, and we were able to get back on track.

The focus of the second session was exercises 5 and 6 in the manual, “Learning to Pray with Vigorous Verbs,” and “On Heaping Up Empty Phrases.” We explored methods and strategies, which give prayers direction and purpose, removing the vagaries from prayer. In addition, these exercises provided guidelines to assist the L.A.T., in editing prayers, by removing and modifying empty phrases. “A good story, well told, marches along on sturdy verbs. So also does a good prayer.”⁶ Learning to pray with “vigorous verbs”⁷ is vitally important to the Collect form of prayer, actually prayer in general, be it individual or corporate. There is one Seasoned Saint in my church that always ends her prayer, asking God to teach us how to pray, and what to pray for. The Bible instructs us “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6).” In addition, we are told, “You do not have, because you do not ask (James 4:2).”

Praying with vigorous verbs takes the guesswork out for God. How often have we heard someone pray, or perhaps we ourselves have prayed and really have not said anything. Although, in public worship we are asked to pray a specific prayer, be it offertory, an invocation, or even altar call, we find that the prayers really do not address the purpose intended. One should be intentional in their prayer, and using vigorous verbs is a great way to do just that. I asked the L.A.T. to spontaneously write a brief prayer for our committee, and every person asked God “to be” with us. The phrase asking God “to

⁶ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 27.

⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

be” with us wrongly implies that the Spirit of the Living God does not constantly dwell within believers, this is known as the absent deity syndrome. By using vigorous verbs, our prayers can be intentional. Instead of asking God to be with us, we can ask God to guide, lead, protect, shelter, encourage, and strengthen us. Using vigorous verbs gives the prayer much more power and intent.

In addition to praying with vigorous verbs, Exercise 6 addresses empty phrases. Stookey identifies two principal reasons why those who pray use empty phrases; “We have not paid sufficient attention to the biblical patterns of prayer, and when we are praying extemporaneously, we use these empty phrases to buy time while we are trying to think of the appropriate petition to use.”⁸ We have all heard them, phrases that just fill in the blanks, but actually say very little. Limiting empty phrases, allows space for prayers to become concise and to the point. Often people use empty phrases when they are called to pray without preparation. Another reason for these filler phrases may be distancing devices, suggesting that we really do not share an intimate relationship with God. “Prayer that is filled with overly polite or even somewhat apologetic phrases may suggest that we treat God as a stranger rather than a friend or parent.”⁹ Ridding ourselves of impotent language such as “may we” and “let us,” in favor of expressions that are more powerful such as “enable us” and “make us” will help make our prayers more impactful.

The final training session focused on interviewing techniques, and the administration of the pre, and posttest surveys. The L.A.T. was encouraged to apply an

⁸ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 27.

⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

ethnographic/proactive research method, which allowed the interviewer to become a “participant observer, joining the faith community as a kenotic empty listener,”¹⁰ while simultaneously guiding participants towards the desired transformation. This approach may promote attentive listening, which may encourage candor and excitement from participants to invest in the Project. We conducted mock interviews among ourselves, paying close attention to facial and body language. In addition, we developed an outline from which the interview questions will be formed (See appendices).

Upon successful completion of the training, it was decided that the L.A.T., would be responsible for administrating, monitoring, training, and editing The Project. In addition, conduct, pre/posttest surveys, and interviews. Each member of the L.A.T., was assigned 6 volunteers, and was responsible to conduct a training workshop for them. Furthermore, the team leader from the L.A.T. wrote the first prayer of each week for their team. As pastor, I wrote the Ash Wednesday prayer to get things started. We scheduled a mandatory Saturday training session in our fellowship hall complete with power point presentations, on the 12th of January. There were many questions during the session, but the L.A.T was equipped to answer them all. Upon completion of the training session, each team leader met with their team members and assigned scripture for the writing of prayers. Honestly, I cannot tell you when our people have been so enthusiastic. I was very pleasantly surprised by their eagerness to begin.

We purchased refreshments and tried to make the atmosphere as conducive to learning as possible. During the administration of the training, the pretest surveys, and individual interviews were conducted. The participants were encouraged during the

¹⁰ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 108.

interviews, to share personal narratives pertaining to their spiritual formation through prayer. The L.A.T., was encouraged to perform this training simultaneously, understanding, circumstances may arise that may not make this convenient. Each team member was accountable for one full week of prayers for The Project. Each week had a theme, and each day had a scripture, from which the volunteers fashioned a prayer. The L.A.T., monitored the volunteer's progress, and assured participants of their availability, should the need for assistance occur.

Recognizing that much still needed to be done, as the 2013 Lenten season was swiftly approaching and time was getting short. We had exactly one month to put everything in place as Ash Wednesday was on February 13, 2013. The pressure to perform was tremendous. In addition to surviving Old Man Winter's inclement weather setbacks, we had to run the gauntlet of the holiday Bermuda Triangle, which consists of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. Those susceptible to addictions such as (overeating, shopping, gambling, and drugs) or those that may have a propensity to lose focus, become lethargic, or slothful, this time of year can be perilous.

Now we had four weeks to make everything come together. I prepared my L.A.T. by alerting them to the necessity to stay on top of their team, and make any provisions necessary to help them complete the task. Failure was not an option. They were to maintain contact with the volunteers through phone calls, text messaging, emails, or Facebook. I wanted the L.A.T. to assure the writers that they would be there every step of the way, providing guidance and encouragement.

We developed a timetable by which certain stages must be done. It was decided that all prayers must be turned in by Sunday, January 27th, so that we would have time to

read and edit the material. In addition, we needed to have everything ready to publish by February 8th, in order to have them out on Sunday the 10th. Not everyone met the deadlines, and some dropped out altogether, apologizing for not realizing how difficult the task would be. Thank God, for the L.A.T. who collectively pitched in and wrote the few prayers that were not finished.

We met the deadline and a tangible product. The 2013 Lenten Daily Devotional Prayer Book (Appendix D) was available on Sunday February 10th. It contained 47 daily devotionals, focusing on weekly Lenten themes from an African American perspective. The Book also contained personal accounts, pictures, and profiles of the participants, and chronicled the journey from an oral tradition, to a postmodern expression of prayer. In addition, the book in its entirety was available via social media outlets on Ash Wednesday. The congregation/community was asked to set aside a period of meditation, and read the daily devotional at noon each day, with the intended purpose of refreshing, refocusing, and recommitting ourselves to prayer.

Having completed the training and implementation of the project, and presenting a finished devotional to the congregation/community, we were finally able to exhale. The past few months had been a rollercoaster ride complete with all the vicissitudes, twists and turns, scares and thrills. We operated in crisis mode for a majority of the time, however, we found grace under fire. The L.A.T., stuck together without any bickering or infighting, not to say there were no disagreements during the process. However, we maintained civility and decorum throughout. One thing I found interesting is that this team, who had not previously spent much time together, developed an affinity for and strong bond with each other. The diverse ages, educational levels, and social locations,

factors, which had at one time prevented them from having a meaningful relationship, had become galvanizing agents in forming lasting friendships.

We decided that we would allow two weeks to pass, to let those participating in reading the devotionals to develop a “habitus.” “Religious practices, when they become habitual and are automatically or unconsciously performed, express the group’s habitus.”¹¹ After the two-week period, we began the process of observation, being cognizant of changes in worship, spiritual acumen, apathy, or any changes in behavior and positive or negative. This task was difficult because, not only were we observing changes in the prayer writers, who are our focus group, in addition, we expanded our scope to notice differences in those participating in the daily reading of prayers. Although, our pre-test survey canvassed only those writing prayers, we were able to observe subtle changes in the worship community.

The final prayer in the journal was written by my wife for Easter Sunday. I must say that though my wife was not officially on the L.A.T., this project would not have met its successful end without her. She took over the difficult task of formatting the journal on the computer so that it could be printed. I had not realized how complicated the process of collating and formatting could be. Now that the implementation phase was complete, we now began the process of conducting post-test interviews and surveys.

We met on April 13, to collect data, and continue the assessment and evaluation period. In addition, we assembled and reviewed collected data and sorted it demographically according to specific groups. We were particularly interested in the age, gender, and education demographic. We decided that a two-week period would be

¹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 52.

necessary to analyze data, and determine what if any transformation has occurred. One thing that I have come to realize is that, even in the midst of difficulty, change is possible. One of the assumptions of narrative therapy is that “Transformation is possible, but not easy,” I agree whole-heartedly.

Each team member was responsible for conducting post-test surveys and interviews of those on their team. The one on one interviews asked basic questions pertaining to the writing of prayers, such as, “Did you find the collect form of writing difficult, and did you find writing a prayer allowed you to stay focused on a particular theme.” In addition, we administered the same survey that we used for the pre-test, in an attempt to notice any differences in their response. Our main objective was to discover if either a once negative attitude towards written prayers has become more positive, or had the negative attitude been reinforced. The gathering of information along with the interview process was exhausting. We concluded our meeting with prayer, and scheduled the next meeting for April 27th.

As we gathered for the final assessment meeting, there seemed to be a strange shift in the atmosphere of the room. I am not sure if it was relief on the part of the L.A.T. that this project, which is now into its eighth month, is finally drawing to a close or something else. I soon discovered that, the aura that radiated from them was an expression of satisfaction and accomplishment. Satisfaction from the fact that the daily devotional readings were completed and were met with rave reviews by the readers. Accomplishment because, several of the L.A.T members initially questioned their abilities and qualifications for participation in the group.

The purpose of this meeting was to engage in project and self-evaluations. Although, as committee members, they provided training, conducted surveys and interviews, collected data, and served as coaches to those on their respective teams, at the end of the day, by writing a prayer each member of the L.A.T. became a participant. Every member was afforded the opportunity to give an assessment of the project. I asked each person to identify what he or she perceived as the best and worst aspects of the project as a whole. In addition, I wanted their thoughts and comments on whether the goals of the project were achieved. I assured them that nothing was off limits. If there was an issue with my leadership during this project, they were to feel free to express that thought. The following are some of the observations that were made:

- Sandra, the Chairperson stated that she appreciated the opportunity to not only participate, but also lead the group. In addition, she thanked the group for accepting her as a leader despite her youth. She also stated that it would have been a greater work if we could have utilized some of the youth in the church and community to write prayers. However, she understood the restraints of parental consent, and the period by which we had to operate would make that very difficult. She also observed that several of the writers on her team had difficulty with scripture interpretation and staying focused on the foundation scripture, which was the basis for their prayers.
- Lashawn reported that more than a few writers became discouraged during the writing phase, believing that they were not academically equipped to engage in such a task. Some shared with her that they did not want to embarrass himself, herself, or the pastor by writing a substandard prayer. However, by taking the

time to individually reinforce the training session, and personally guiding them through the process, their confidence began to grow. Eventually, they were able to embrace the writing.

- Curtis first apologized for not being able to attend every session because of his work schedule. He stated that he was honored to be part of the team. Not only could he identify growth in the congregation from this project, but personal growth as well. In addition, he observed that the goal of completing the daily devotional was achieved; however, adoption of writing as an acceptable spiritual discipline was yet to be determined.

We concluded our final meeting the same way as our first meeting, by gathering in a circle, holding hands, and praying for each other.

SITE VISIT

My advisor, Dr. Gary Simpson, conducted our site visit at the Roger Williams Church on June 3, 2013 @ 7pm. To my surprise, he arrived one hour early, whether purposely or coincidentally I do not know. However, when I arrived at the church with refreshments for the visit, he was waiting for me. I had anticipated having time to prepare my Lay Advisory Team for the meeting prior to his arrival. My L.A.T arrived earlier to the agreed upon meeting time to be briefed by me, only to discover Dr. Simpson was already present. We retreated to the fellowship hall where we all became acquainted, and then we enjoyed the refreshments.

He then proceeded to engage the L.A.T. in dialogue pertaining to my project. This meeting was very emotional, because of the realization that our journey together was drawing to a close. Dr. Simpson spoke with each team member, asking several questions

of our work. This included questions about the course material, training for the L.A.T., and the leadership provided by the pastor. I began to excuse myself so that each member of the committee could be candid. However, I was asked to stay by the group. This made me feel great that the committee would feel comfortable enough to speak candidly in front of me, without fear of reprisal.

Each member gave their input, and recounted the part they played in the planning, implementation, and evaluation process. Dr. Simpson asked, “What if anything caught them by surprise?” To a person, the preeminent occurrence that caught them off-guard was that, they had not expected the work to be as thought provoking and time consuming. As we journeyed deeper into the project, the more they as a committee had to draw upon their personal spiritual intellect, and knowledge of God. Finally, after being satisfied I hope, with the responses from the L.A.T., Dr. Simpson congratulated them on a job well done. At that moment, with no prompting, the committee as a whole expressed to Dr. Simpson their love and admiration for me, actually bringing me to tears. I thanked them for their faithfulness, and their willingness to allow me to lead them as pastor. Lastly, I let them know that the successful completion of this project could not have happened without them.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT EVALUATION

The Project endeavored to promote transformation of a predominately African American church, as it encounters the spiritual discipline of writing prayers. In addition, The Project monitored the changes in the corporate and individual, spiritual formation of the congregation, casting light upon shadow stories, and changes in the prevailing narratives. The evaluation process employed a combination of **functionalist, structuralist, and semiotic** approaches to these convergent theologies. A multiplicity of strategies was needed to analyze, and assess the effectiveness of the project upon the individual participants and the church at large.

By utilizing the **structuralist** approach, I was better able to identify “unconscious patterns that shaped the context.”¹ The Project attempted to uncover and expose the shadow stories of the participants, as they relate and shape the prevailing narratives of the congregation and community. In addition, by simultaneously employing a **functionalist** evaluation, we discerned how parts of a context fit together differently than before. Finally, the **semiotic** approach, gave us the ability to discern the narratives from the inside that affirm the identity of the group. The L.A.T. and I endeavored to interpret and observe the transformation, if any of The Project on the congregation and community.

¹ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 129.

EVALUATION MEETING

It is hard to believe that the project was over. We began this journey together in September 2012 and now eight months later it is over. During this time, I truly believe that everyone involved has gained a greater love and respect for the other. I have been overwhelmed by the determination and support the L.A.T has provided. Honestly, there were times when I felt as if I would give up, however, the committee seemed to have the capacity to recognize my weakness, and would find ways to encourage me to fight on. The committee worked together as a mighty fighting force that continued to advance in the battle. I was reminded of the biblical narrative that is recorded in Exodus 17: 8-15, when Amalek came to do battle with Israel.

Moses instructed Joshua to go down and do battle, and he would stand on the top of a hill with the rod of God in his hand. As Joshua and the mighty men of valor engaged the enemy, whenever Moses held his hands high, Israel would prevail. However, during the course of the battle Moses became weary. Aaron noticed that when Moses hands came down, Amalek would advance. Therefore, he and Hur sat Moses on a large stone and positioned themselves on each side of Moses to hold his arms aloft, and Israel won the battle. I dare not compare myself to Moses, however, when my arms grew heavy, the committee held them up.

All of the previous meetings of the L.A.T., have taken place at our church. Realizing that a change of venue was needed, I invited everyone to meet for the final time at my home. I believed that a shift in the atmosphere would help the committee to relax and be candid with their responses and observations. We had conducted surveys and had spoken about transformation and change among the congregation and community;

however, I intentionally had not discussed any of the typical ways of examining the post-project context. My reasoning was because, I did not want the L.A.T to become bogged down and begin to over-think the evaluation process. They needed to let their creative juices flow, and not become restricted by form or fashion.

We began the meeting as usual with prayer, and then began discussing the project informally, sharing general observations. I asked the group, to recall the funniest moment of the journey. Everyone had a story to tell. I found it interesting to note that they found humor in the personal narratives of the prayer writers, not that they were laughing at them, but that the writers allowed them inside some intimately personal experiences. This actually typifies the semiotic approach, which depends heavily on descriptions of the context from within. Many congregants allowed the members of the committee the opportunity to become a part of their personal narrative, sharing their fears, concerns, family histories, and personal triumphs and tragedies.

However, before getting too deeply into an evaluation of those that participated in the project, I wanted to hear how this project had affected the members of the L.A.T. Had they noticed any change within themselves? I had given each member a sheet of paper to write down responses to questions I would ask. I did not want everyone to concur with someone else's answer. Several questions were put to the group. "Since becoming a part of this committee has your personal prayer life been changed and if so how?" Taking the time to be insightful and truthful with their responses indicated to me the seriousness of which they had become engaged in the project. The moment became very surreal to me, because I began to understand that this was no longer my project, it was our project.

“The evaluation process includes researcher and partners, all participants, and the project itself.”¹ To my surprise, every person on the committee had the same response in some fashion, to the question of a change in their personal prayer life. Each indicated that they have become intentional about their petitions to God. In addition, they have stated that the use of scripture has become a launching point for their prayer life. By reading the daily devotional, they shared that they could more accurately discern God’s purpose and direction in their everyday lives. However, no one stated that they have begun to write prayers for personal devotion.

I also asked how their relationship with God has been impacted by participating in this project. Everyone indicated that it had for the better; however, what intrigued me the most was that each person declared that their relationships with others had been enhanced since participating in the project. This was an unexpected bonus. I am sure that our church is not the only one that has several special interest groups, yet this project seems to have begun a process of tearing down those boundaries. I asked how? They shared with me that they became much more compassionate and understanding of people within the congregation and community. I prodded them to expound on their answer, and they reluctantly shared with me the difficulty that many people had with the writing of prayers. I told them that I am aware that people had difficulty, so I pushed the envelope further to see what would develop. Finally, they confessed to me that, the reason people had such difficulty writing a prayer is because many within the congregation do not read well.

¹ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 125.

This revelation could be a major factor in the resistance of the African American Baptist church to the writing of prayers. The L.A.T. began to share several stories of how those writing prayers were almost in tears admitting their reading and comprehension deficiencies. This is a critical observation that must be addressed in order to have the writing of prayers become a part of the spiritual formation of our congregation. The uncovering of this problem happened because the time was taken to listen to the stories of the people. Storytelling is the primary way in which human beings structure and understand their experience of life. “The stories we tell express our beliefs about God, the world, and our place in it.”²

I then shifted our focus to the opinion of the prayer writers, what type of feedback have they received about our project. Sandra, the chairperson of the L.A.T spoke on behalf of the group. I lovingly refer to her as my daughter, because I have been her pastor since she was 10 years old. She began by complimenting me and the project, pointing out some of the good things that people enjoyed, before getting to the things that met resistance.

Some points of contention I had expected to encounter such as, how did I chose those to participate on the committee. In addition, some still were convinced that the L.A.T had been endowed with governing authority. However, she unearthed some issues, which included, quite a few people had inquired why the prayers had to be penned in the Collect form; they were not accustomed to praying in this fashion. Some felt that

² Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 144.

particular type of prayer restricted their creativity. In addition, some were disappointed that they had to compose a prayer from a scripture that they did not personally choose, believing that if they were writing, then they should choose the biblical text.

Finally, the one that all L.A.T members encountered, which was the use of inclusive and patriarchal language. Some members became downright argumentative about not being able to refer to God as Father. They argued that if it was good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us. Someone even went so far as to say that “Pastor Davidson was bringing that liberal Drew bull*#@! Up in here.” I thought that one was funny. Most said that it was extremely difficult to relate to God as anything other than him. I thanked Sandra for her forthrightness in relaying those issues to me, and that they would duly noted.

As our meeting began to draw to a close, I asked the members of the L.A.T. if they have observed any notable accomplishments resulting in significant changes in the ministry context and/or the community. One observation they were able to make was that they have noticed that, during times of prayer in the worship experience, congregants are paying much more attention. I followed up the response by asking, “To what are they paying more attention?” They replied that worshippers, especially those who participated in the writing, are listening to the language used by the person praying. Some are listening for inclusive and patriarchal language; others for more imaginative ways of addressing God, yet still others are listening for empty phrases or if the Collect form of prayer are being used.

The final question asked of the L.A.T was, “Have you perceived any transformation within the congregation/community?” A couple of committee members

replied that they have noticed some changes within the congregation. I advised them that change and transformation are two different things. Transformation refers to a change in structure, appearance, or character usually for the better, whereas change can just mean doing things differently. In addition, “We also need to be aware that change does not unambiguously connect to progress. Change is not progress; it is simply change.”³ Upon describing the differences between transformation and change, the committee struggled to find places where transformation had occurred. Reluctantly, they came to the realization that perhaps there was none.

I reassured them that they did a superb job as members of the L.A.T, and that just because they could not pinpoint where or if transformation had occurred does not mean that nothing happened. My chairperson’s eyes began to water, thinking that if the project was unsuccessful, then I would fail. In an effort to relieve their anxiety, I told them that a failed project, which I am not sure this is one, does not mean that the person has failed. The criteria by which we shall be assessed, is not the success of the project, but the organization and leadership exhibited during the process.

On that note, I thought it was a good time to adjourn the meeting. I thanked all the members of the committee for their diligence throughout this 8-month journey. In addition, I thanked God for the spirit of discernment, which allowed them to be chosen for this project. We gathered for prayer, and this time I asked someone else to lead us.

³ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2006), 125.

As we prayed, a feeling of contentment fell upon us all, as we were able to enjoy satisfaction on a job well done.

PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

While it is difficult to assess myself, I believe that I achieved my goals as outlined in this project:

1. Encourage the members of the Roger Williams Baptist Church, to adopt the writing of prayers as a spiritual discipline.
2. Initiate a transition in the expression of our prayers, from an oral tradition to a written legacy.
3. Using the written Word of God as our foundation, design a daily devotional prayer booklet, which will focus on the Lenten Season, from an African American perspective.
4. Via the narratives of community and congregation, we shall integrate the Lenten themes of atonement and sacrifice.

As I reflect on the journey of the past 8 months, I have noticed several changes within the church and community. The first is that those who pray publicly in our church are intentional in choosing the appropriate language and petitions that are brought before God. Many of the cliché empty phrases have been replaced with much more meaningful expressions of faith. Through this project, there have been some practices that have continued to evolve. One is the use of scripture, which is being used more frequently as a foundational base from which public prayers are built. It has become evident in our Sunday invocation prayers that, our Deacon Ministry has embraced the use of scripture in prayer.

Another by-product of the project was the prayer booklet itself. The congregation/community enjoyed the prayers so much that it was difficult keeping up with the demand for the booklets. Our initial rationale was that we would only print 100 copies of the material, mainly for our Seasoned Saints ministry. We believed that by posting the material on our church's Facebook page, and doing mass daily emails to those who gave an email address, we could accommodate most everyone else. We made a major miscalculation. The demand for the booklet was awesome, something we had not expected. Parishioners from neighboring churches wanted copies of the booklet. We found ourselves making additional copies well into the Lenten Season.

One thing that I have observed is that people are vain. Another reason we printed so many booklets is that many of our writers were so proud to have taken part that they desired copies of the booklet to send to friends and family that live outside of the Metropolitan area. By incorporating photographs, stories, and prayers of the writers, made the booklet more collectable and desirable.

There were some issues that were uncovered in pursuant of this project. The major issue was the fact that the reading level of many within the congregation is subpar. The lack of reading skill is easily hidden in many African American churches because the order of service in most churches has become so routine, and members have committed litanies, responsive readings, and church covenants to memory. This explains a glaring situation, which is that more people show up for the Adult Sunday School class than Wednesday Christian Growth. I have noticed that when the Christian Growth sessions contain materials such as workbooks, the attendance reduces dramatically. Even though our Sunday school utilizes weekly reading material, upon having a discussion with my

Superintendent we realized that most do not read the lessons at home. We know this by the discussion that takes place during class; the teachers are unable to present a more in-depth lesson because people have not read. In addition, I am a firm believer that the questions we ask provide more insight into our knowledge of a subject than the answers we give.

Allowing space for introspective observation, I have come to the realization that this project has provided a positive impact on my ministry. Given the adversity and challenges that confronted us, because our project was time sensitive, I believe that my character has been strengthened. Tom Ufert once coined a phrase, “Adversity builds character,” perhaps this is true in his context. However, I have discovered through this project that adversity does not build character, it reveals character. If those on the L.A.T and myself suffered from a lack of integrity and character, the obstacles which we faced implementing this project would have been revealed.

I must honestly share that upon the revelation of the reading problem in our church, I became undone. How could I have not noticed this problem? I had always believed I was in sync with my congregation. I now realize that I had been viewing my congregation through a myopic lens. The lack of pastoral ethnography was apparent, however, I did not recognize the problem. “Pastoral ethnography is, at heart, a listening practice...Religious leaders are often socialized to be better at speaking than at listening.”⁴ Listening is a learned behavior, it does not come naturally, and it must be

⁴ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 141.

cultivated. Since the completion of the project, I have become more aware of the stories and actions of those around me. Pastoral ethnographers must listen with their senses, taking notice of body language, tone of voices and even silence, which sometimes speaks louder than words.

Dale Carnegie iconic writer, lecturer, and developer of many self-improvement courses famously stated, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” By recognizing the fact the many worshippers struggle with reading, (the lemons), an opportunity has presented itself for ministry, (the lemonade). Our church is blessed to have several professional educators, one of which is a retired certified special education teacher, to whom I have discussed spearheading this important ministry. Perhaps, by providing an opportunity to enhance their reading skills, those who struggle with reading will improve to a point of comfortability and proficiency.

In an effort to assist our membership with reading, I have taken a proactive approach. Part of this approach was to replace our existing King James Version pew bibles, with the more contemporary and easier to read New Living Translation bibles. I also use the NLT bible for my scripture text for sermons, and in our Christian Growth classes. In addition, the Sunday school material that we use offers a parallel reading from the King James, as well as the NLT. I have found that many in the congregation have embraced this change, and have begun to spend more time reading God’s Word. I believe that a direct correlation can be drawn between the congregations reading efficacy and their increased understanding of scripture.

Finally, I believe that this project has made a subtle, yet significant contribution to pastoral ministry. This project has shown that members of a congregation/community are

capable of more than we think. Oftentimes whether we will admit it or not, we, as trained clergy, wrongly believe that we have all the answers. We do not allow space for members to grow into mature Christians, because of an unsubstantiated fear that if they mature, then we will not longer be needed. This project has enlightened me to the fact that the more the congregation knows, the more they grow, and with that growth, experienced confident clergy is needed.

In addition, I understand that the days of autocratic leadership are past. It is essential for pastors to operate from a position of power with a congregation, instead of trying to assert power over. As a result of this revelation, I continue to meet with the Lay Advisory Team, as we strengthen the partnership between pastor and people. In Ephesians 4:11-12 (NRSV), the Apostle Paul speaks to the purpose of spiritual gifts by writing that God gave, “That some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Although, there may be situations in pastoral ministry when decisions must be made which may be unpopular, such as selecting those to serve in leadership positions or deciding which ministry methods and programs are appropriate, it is imperative for anyone in a position of pastoral authority to recognize that, 21st century leadership mandates that partnership with the congregation is always the best course of action.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

The following pre/posttest survey will be used to collect data for, The Spiritual Discipline of Writing Prayers in the African American Church project. This survey will be distributed to those who write, as well as those who will share in the daily reading of the Lenten Prayer book. Please circle the number on each scale, which represents your view. For example, if you believe God always answers prayer, circle 1. If you think, God does not answer all prayers circle 3. If you believe that God never answers prayer, circle 5. There are no correct answers to the survey, please answer honestly.

- | | | |
|---|-----------|---|
| 1. I believe that God always answers prayer. | 1 2 3 4 5 | I think God is not interested in our prayers. |
| 2. Even though I don't always see an obvious answer to prayer, I believe that God has answered. | 1 2 3 4 5 | When I don't see any obvious answers to prayer, I doubt that God has heard. |
| 3. If God appears to say 'no' to my prayer, I realize it is for my own good. | 1 2 3 4 5 | I find it difficult to accept a 'no' answer. |
| 4. When God answers my prayers, my faith is strengthened. | 1 2 3 4 5 | When prayers appear to be answered, it is really just a coincidence. |
| 5. I am always talking to God. | 1 2 3 4 5 | There are days when I never pray. |
| 6. I am always praising and thanking God in prayer. | 1 2 3 4 5 | My prayers are just like a shopping list of requests. |
| 7. When I don't feel like praying, that's when I pray even harder | 1 2 3 4 5 | If I don't feel like praying, then I don't. |

8. I feel relaxed praying with other people. 1 2 3 4 5 I am always embarrassed about praying with others.
9. I feel my prayer life is really growing. 1 2 3 4 5 My prayer life is dead.
10. The most important purpose of prayer is: (Please circle only one answer).
- a. To improve your own life
 - b. To help others
 - c. To express your intentions
 - d. Intimacy with God
 - e. To seek God's guidance
 - f. To thank God for your blessings
11. How often do you pray? (Please circle only one answer).
- a. More than once each day
 - b. Once a day
 - c. A few times a week
 - d. Once a week
 - e. A few times a month
 - f. Once a month
 - g. Every few months
 - h. Not at all
12. When you pray do you:
- a. Light candles
 - b. Use beads
 - c. Kneel
 - d. Use incense
 - e. Chant
 - f. Say prayers out loud
 - g. Say prayers silently
 - h. Write prayers

13. In the last six months, my prayers have related to: (Darken most correct answers).

Health & Safety

Often Sometimes Never

Personal finances or work

Often Sometimes Never

Relationships

Often Sometimes Never

God's forgiveness

Often Sometimes Never

God's guidance

Often Sometimes Never

Improving the world

Often Sometimes Never

Stronger faith

Often Sometimes Never

Giving thanks

Often Sometimes Never

14. How often have you written your prayers:

- a. Never
- b. Sometimes
- c. Often

15. Would the personal writing of prayers, help focus your pleadings before God?

- a. Often
- b. Occasionally
- c. Never

16. How might the personal writing of prayers enhance your relationship with God?

17. Share an experience when your faith has been strengthened from reading or hearing a written prayer?

APPENDIX B

WRITING PRAYERS

A guide for those
who pray in public

INTRODUCTION

- ◉ Communal Prayers (for everyone not self)
- ◉ No personal pronouns: I, me, my
- ◉ Gender Neutral: no Father, Master, King

HOW WE PRAY

- ◉ COL-lect form prayer consists of five parts
 - 1. Address : *Almighty God*
 - In the address refrain from Master, Father, King or gender biased titles
 - 2. Attribution: *unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid*
 - The attribution is usually taken directly from scripture

HOW WE PRAY II

- ◎ 3. Petition: *Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit*
 - Petition should be specific; what you want God to do

- ◎ 4. Purpose: *that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name;*
 - The purpose tells why you want God to grant your petition

- ◎ 5. Closing: *through Christ our Lord....Amen.*

USING VIGOROUS VERBS

◉ Strong, specific action verbs

- Give us
- Forgive us
- Guide us
- Deliver us
- Restore us
- Protect us

WHAT TO PRAY FOR?

- ◉ Choose a topic/theme
- ◉ Select a scripture related to the topic
- ◉ Be consistent and specific

EXAMPLE

- ⦿ John 3: 16
- ⦿ 1. Gracious God,
- ⦿ 2. You have loved the world so much as to send to us your only Son.
- ⦿ 3. Enable us to believe in Him with true faith,
- ⦿ 4. That we may not perish but have eternal life;
- ⦿ 5. Through Jesus Christ our Savior we pray, Amen

Appendix C

2013 Book of Lenten Prayers

Roger Williams Baptist Church

Ash Wednesday, February 13, 2013

~ 12 Noon Daily ~

Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013



Pastor W. B. Davidson

I would like to take this time to welcome you this Lenten season. This is a time of introspection, as well as a time to reflect upon our relationship with Jesus the Christ. Traditionally, those whom observe this season, sacrifice something dear to them, to demonstrate their sincerity as they prepare for the observance of the Risen Savior. The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday, and culminates on Easter (Resurrection) Sunday.

The members of the Roger Williams Institutional Baptist Church, has committed themselves to the spiritual discipline of writing prayers during this season. We have chosen seven traditional themes; however, we have attempted to embrace them through an African American perspective. Each prayer is inspired by scripture, and will be used as a daily devotional. Though we will be in various places, every day during the noon hour, we shall read the prayers, using them as a springboard to reflect upon our relationship with Christ.

The prayers in this devotional have been slightly edited; however, we have attempted to maintain the integrity, spirit, and purpose for which they were written. We invite you to take this journey with us, as we explore the riches of God's word and the transformative power of the Divine Presence in our lives.

Pastor W. B. Davidson

Brokenness
*The Potter Wants
 to Put You Back Together Again...*

ASH WEDNESDAY

FEBRUARY 13, 2013: Ezekiel 36:26-27

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth. We recognize that there is none like you. We lift your name on high, as we sing your praises, for you have done great things. Now O God, as we humbly approach you with a contrite spirit, we welcome your transforming grace into our lives.

We understand there have been times when arrogance has allowed us to lose our focus, preventing us from having compassion for our neighbor, and causing separation from your Divine Presence. Our hearts have been hardened, as we have pursued worldly ambitions, only to discover temporary personal satisfaction, and no redeeming value. Help us to cry out for the spiritual brokenness that will soften our hearts, and renew our spirit.

As we enter this Lenten season, a time of sacrifice, reflection, and hope, we ask that you will remove a heart hardened by selfish ambitions, and replace it with one of compassion. Create in us a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within us. Transform us, by the renewing of our minds, so that we will seek after good things for others, and ourselves. Bless us with spiritual common sense, which will encourage us to follow your divine precepts.

Moreover, O God, acknowledging our need to be made over in your image, and likeness, we welcome brokenness. Through your redeeming grace, we are able to say, that you took everything I was, and made me who I am. Amen

*Submitted by,
 Pastor D.*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2013: Psalm 34:18-19

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all.

Eternal God our Savior: You answer our prayers when we call on you for help, and rescue us from all our troubles. By the power of your Holy Spirit, we stand before your throne of mercy as humble and sincere as we know how saying thank you for brokenness. We thank you for all the times you have carried us through times of trouble. Although we wish we could escape the pain of grief, sorrow, loss, failure, and even the frustrations of day-to-day living; we are thankful that you have remained by our side to see us through them all.

We are thankful that you are our source of power, courage, and wisdom, helping us through our problems. Thank you for saving us when our spirits were crushed. You have taken the pieces where we were broken and gathered them to yourself. You have put them back together and formed a stronger being.

Through brokenness, you have taught us things that can only be revealed by you. We know that as long as there is breath in our bodies, we will have to experience troubles and victories. By standing firm on our faith, knowing, trusting, and believing that you will protect, save, and restore us we can endure them all.

You desire to fill us with your presence through the Holy Spirit, but we must be broken first. Brokenness is never a weakness; it is the dying of one's self life. In Matthew 5:3 it says, "The broken person is truly a blessed person." Through brokenness, we are able to comprehend the need of your presence as Savior in our life.

Humble us that we may be convicted, and recognize the sin that is present in our life, so that we may repent and follow you. Fall fresh on us, break us, melt us, mold us, and fill us with who you desire us to be. Bring us into a right relationship with you, so that we may fulfill the works of thy calling. Strengthen us to yield, surrender and submit to you, the Lover of our souls, so that your will be done in our lives. Compel us to deny ourselves and make you the chief custodian of our lives. We also ask that you direct every aspect of our lives, and that no walls of sin or hard-heartedness remain within us. We thank you for this painful, yet purifying process. If it takes brokenness to draw closer to you, we welcome the experience.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

*Submitted by:
Sis. LaShawn Cheatom*

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2013: Romans 8:26-28

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Gracious God, the one who in your infinite wisdom uses broken dreams to redeem us. Through our brokenness, it is revealed that we do not know what we should pray for however, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us. Rescue us O God from our brokenness. Our life is full of broken dreams, relationships, and expectations, how can we live with this brokenness? Only through the Holy Spirit whose strength is made manifest in our weakness, can we cope with our brokenness.

O loving God in such a time as this, when we do not know what to pray for, we bow in humble submission. As we bow, we ask that you search our hearts O Lord, for we know that you who search the hearts know the mind of the Spirit. Therefore, we welcome your Holy Spirit, which continues to make intercession for the saints of God.

In the Matchless name of Jesus we pray, AMEN

Submitted by:

Deaconess Yolanda Rozier

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2013: 2 Corinthians: 9-11

As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.

Dear Heavenly God, give us this day so that we can say thank you. You brought us out of darkness in to the marvelous light. We want to thank you because, you allowed us to repent of our sins. We magnify Your holy name. We were in a world of sorrow, and you brought us into your spiritual world. O God, we want spiritual cleansing. Amen

Submitted by,

Bro. Ricky Winston

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2013: James 4:9-10

Lament and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Faithful and Loving God; when we find ourselves in sin, allow us to come before you with an open heart, and an available spirit. Knowing that if we draw nearer to you, you will draw nearer to us.

God, we realize that we are a sinful people. We know that at times we sin against you, and do that which is displeasing in your sight. We come in brokenness, asking that you not allow pride to abide within us and hinder us from seeking your forgiveness. Not only do we come with a repentant heart, but we also come with a remorseful spirit. We come broken because we have yielded to the temptation of sin instead of resisting the devil, so that he would flee far from us.

We come with a tear stained face, burdened with sadness and grief as a result of our disappointing you, and not being guarded against sin. We desire to be more like you, and hate sin because you hate sin. Grant us boldness to stand against the worldliness of this world. We do not want to live a hypocritical life, laughing and rejoicing when we do wrong. Instead, convict us by the Holy Spirit in sadness and gloom, realizing that sin separates us from you. Remove all levels of comfort where sin abides.

Expose the sin in our life, and allow the feeling of guilt to draw us closer to you. Help us to realize just how much we need you in our lives. In this state of brokenness, we bow down before you surrendering all, and totally depending on you to make us all that you would have us to be.

Humble us O God to understand that even in our undeserving state, your grace and mercy over our lives allows favor to continue to fall upon us. We submit to your sovereignty knowing that your plan for our life is better than any plan we could ever hope for ourselves. You alone deserve the right to be exalted and honored for your excellence. When we are able to despise pride and worldliness and humble ourselves to live as you have called us to live, then you will lift us from this brokenness and honor us.

We seek these and all changes through Christ our Lord. Amen

Submitted by,

Lay Advisory Team

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2013: Psalm 51:16-18

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem

Awesome God of deliverance and healing, oh how we love and adorn your ways. You are the light that shines through the darkness we face each day. You require a sacrifice of a broken spirit and contrite heart. Oh, please Lord hear the cry of your children for healing, so we may rejoice in the deliverance that can only come from you. Restore us in the midst of our hardships for we come to you in truth, and by the ever-increasing faith that you have given our lives.

We say today Lord, this world is dark and grows darker every day; we give ourselves as a living sacrifice, so that we may be made whole for your purpose and glory. We do this with the faith that exceeds a mustard seed.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by, Sis. Jessica Williamson

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2013: Jeremiah 18:1-4

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

The Most High God, we come to thank you and give you the praise. When we are scared and broken, we need to seek God and ask for forgiveness. God wants us to be more like him. God will keep making us over and, God will restore us.

In Jesus name, Amen

*Submitted by,
Mother Jean Wright*

Reconciliation

Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Your Anger

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2013: *Ephesians 2:14-17*

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. Moreover, reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

Most Holy God, The one who mends broken hearts, lifts down cast heads, and gives peace when trouble is abound, we humbly come into your presence once more. O God, as we continue in this Lenten Season, we now ask for a spirit of reconciliation. Allow us to use the example of Jesus to understand how you would want us to be. Jesus took on the ultimate sacrifice of the cross, and tore down the walls of sin that we may be reconciled to you.

Lord, as we endeavor to be more like you, we ask for forgiveness of our sins, so that we may be acceptable in your sight. God be our strength as we fight spirits of addiction, lust, pride, laziness, fear, low self-esteem, and anything else unlike you. God stretch forth your hand of mercy, because we are as filthy rags and would be nothing without you. Finally, as we prepare to continue our day, we ask for the desire and ability to not only be reconciled with you, but with co-workers, family members, friends, acquaintances and even ourselves. How can we say we love God who we never seen but hate our neighbor?

Mighty God we trust and love you,
and pray these things in your Unfailing Name, Amen

*Submitted by,
Sis. Sandra Jones*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2013: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

With full anticipation of your glory, humbly we approach your Divine Presence. We approach seeking your forgiveness of our sins, which we commit daily. We recognize that we have fallen short of your glory however, with lifted hearts we yearn to be nearer to thee. Oh Magnificent one, remove those things which will hinder, and distract us from relationship with you. Show us how to live accordingly, and reconcile our hearts to become a better people.

Disclose unto us your life changing ways, for which you have ransomed us. Guard our eyes and tongues from seeing and speaking those things which, could cause others to stumble and fall. You have shown us your immeasurable love by, giving your only begotten son as an offering, so that we can be right with you. Submissively, we enter into covenant with you, hoping to become a reflection of your glory. Your precious word says, ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened. With great devotion we grasp unto these encouraging words, along with the faith we share in Jesus, trusting and believing that all things are possible.

We pray this in the name above all names, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Submitted by: Deaconess Linda Felder

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2013: Psalm 51:12

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Everlasting God, the one who has loved us so much, and has never forsaken your own, we come before your Throne of Grace, seeking forgiveness of our sins. Create in us O God, a clean and pure heart, and make us willing to obey your commands. Remove any stain or blemish, which prevents us from drawing nearer to you. Order our steps so we can walk right, open our eyes so that we may see right, and touch our lips so that we may speak right. Lord, we thank you for your unfailing and merciful love, and we ask that your Holy Spirit continue to dwell with us. For, we realize our need for thee every hour. O God, my storage is empty, and I am available to you.

In the Precious name of Jesus, Amen

Submitted by: Aisha Morgan

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2013: *Matthew 5:23-24*

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Lord, we bow in humble submission to you, praising you for all the things that you continually so for us. We thank you for the peace in knowing that you are always there. We glorify you for who you are in our lives, and in the lives of those we love. Help us O God, to be an example to those we come in contact with, that through word and deed we can show our faith in you. Strengthen us so that we can stand firm in our faith.

Through good times and bad, help us to be careful, keep calm, and not lose heart because of evil doers. Surround each of us with your Holy Spirit, so that we will know when to speak and when to keep silent. We ask this so that you and only you will receive all the glory and praise.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by: Bro. James D. Adams

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2013: *Micah 7:18-19*

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

O Most High, all-powerful and loving God, to whom belong all praise, honor and glory. We thank you for your unconditional love. Lord, as we enter this Lenten season, let everything we do be inspired by you. May the small things we choose to give up during this time, help us to focus on those who are less fortunate than we are.

Sovereign God, King of Kings, because you are the giver of all-good, we thank you. Help us Lord to realize that no matter what we do, nothing is important in this life unless it glorifies you. Encourage us to continue to confess our sins, knowing that you are faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As we meditate on the Cross and Christ, may we remember that Jesus suffered for our pardon and peace. That Jesus died so that we may live forever. So in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us. Amen

Submitted by: Deaconess Dorothy Dorsey

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2013: 1 Samuel 15:24-25 Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the LORD."

Dear Lord, during this Lenten season feed me with your words of life, and make me one with You in love and prayer. Keep me faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and give me the grace to rise above my human weakness. Help me during this time to make better choices for myself spiritually and physically.

Encourage me to practice generosity to others as I have opportunity. Lastly, but not least, during this Lenten season, I submit myself to you Lord, striving to believe in you with all my heart for all things.

In the name of Jesus, who is able to keep me from falling and present me faultless before His throne. Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Sophia Benjamin

Dear Holy Most Precious God,

Through you Father there is Love. Through you there is Peace, Through you there is Hope. Father God your loving kindness lives within us. Help us Father to tap into your Holy Spirit that You have given to us freely so that we may show more love, peace and hope to our neighbors. Help us to reconcile with those that may show hatred, or anger towards us. Lead us as you have lead Jesus to love first and to forgive others as you have forgiven us.

Thank you Father for you son Jesus having been born, died, and resurrected from the dead so that we may be saved. May we as a people draw closer to you through your son Jesus Christ so we can continue to spread the goodness of Jesus through all the nations as you have instructed.

In Jesus Holy and Precious name we pray. Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Dionne McNair

Deliverance

God Has Not Brought Us This Far to Leave Us

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2013: *Psalm 60:11-12*

O grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless. With God, we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes.

Most Righteous God, we come to you with wounded hearts, and minds that are filled with despair. Gracious God, we come to you today seeking deliverance. Forgive us for we have put our troubles in the hands of others, rather than you our Savior and Protector.

We humbly ask that you guide us in diligently seeking your wisdom, mercy, and forgiveness. Whenever we are troubled and our burdens seem too much to bear, when those we love and even those we do not know have wronged us, we know undoubtedly that you will show compassion and mercy. We turn to you our loving and merciful God, so that we will not become discouraged and distrustful. O Lord purify our hearts and thoughts, teach us to love thy enemy. We pray that our enemies will see your kindness and your infinite love. Protector of all things, deliver us from our unholy ways, and restore our hearts and minds with unrestricted love for our enemies.

These things we ask in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen

*Submitted by,
Bro. Curtis Burton*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2013: Daniel 3:21-26

So the men were bound, still wearing their tunics, their trousers, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. Because the king's command was urgent and the furnace was so overheated, the raging flames killed the men who lifted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god."

Merciful God, first born fruit, by the blood of the true and living God, we are delivered from all of our sins. We praise you Lord with all our hearts. Deliver us from every evil attack, and bring us safely into your heavenly kingdom. We will tell the world of all your wonders. As Christians we are thrown into the fiery furnace, but like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, we must seek your deliverance through prayer and faith. Guide us for we are always being given over to death for Jesus sake, so that his life may be revealed in our bodies. Christ has not brought us year after year to leave us. To you we give all the glory. We ask this prayer of deliverance through our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen

*Submitted by:
Sis. Denise Fisher*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2013: Isaiah 54:17 & 55:1

No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, says the LORD.

God of deliverance, in times of self destruction and in times of spiritual death, we thank you Lord that no weapons formed against us shall prosper. Cover us with your righteousness. Shower down an anointing of direction, that we may be removed of our evil ways. Show mercy on us this we ask in your Son's name. Amen

*Submitted by:
Sis. Serena Mae Holmes*

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2013: Psalm 60:11-12

*O grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless.
With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes.*

Our Savior, who is stronger than any help we know, we look to you for help. Deliver us from all our sins so that we may have a better and closer walk with you. We realize that it is better to take refuge in you our Savior, than to trust in humankind. Amen

Submitted by,

Bro. Larry Newkirk

SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 2013: Genesis 50:20

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

Lord, King of Kings, ruler over all, you are our deliverer. You are the Son of God, who died for us and rose again. Touch us God, and deliver us from sin so that we are able to walk Holy in your sight. Give us the courage to stand firm on your word. Whoever calls upon the Lord will be delivered, so we call upon you Lord to give us spiritual and physical deliverance. AMEN

Submitted by:

Sis. Rhonda Newkirk

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2013: Daniel 6:18-23

Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him. Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong." Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Dear Lord, Thank you lord for protecting and shielding us during our times of despair. Thank you for seeing the good in us, even when we could not see it in ourselves. Lord, keep us safe and protect us from evil. O Lord, when tries to come in to distract us, we know who our God is, and we continue to trust you Lord. In the name of Jesus, we submit every dark and sinful thought and desire, we have ever entertained into your hands, for a work of purification, redemption and deliverance to take place. We surrender our unclean desires, to make amends with you for the sins we have committed.

Deliver us from every situation Satan has used to control us because of our sins. We speak forth and proclaim you as Lord of all, knowing that you alone are able to set us free. Deliver us from all our sins. We praise you and give you all the glory God. Thank you for all that you have done for and been to us. Amen

*Submitted by:
Sis Quiese Maultsby-Alston*

Faith

God of Our Weary Years)

MONDAY, MARCH 4, 2013: Hebrews 11:6-7

And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Transforming God, increase our faith, teach us how to “Walk by faith and not by sight.” Give us strength to stand strong on your promises and believe your every word. We do not want to be like the people who did not profit from hearing the Word. We know that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” Make our faith increase every time we hear your word. Help us to believe that your promises will be fulfilled in us. We pray that the genuineness of our faith, which is more precious than gold, which perishes even when it is tested by fire, will be glorifying to you Lord.

We know “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” We understand that we have been saved through faith, and it is a gift from God. Increase our faith so that we can pray with power. Give us faith to believe that the sick shall be healed each time we pray. We do not want to see a need and not have faith strong enough to pray, and believe the situation to change.

We recognize that without faith it is impossible to please you. Help us to believe without doubting. For we know that “they who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.” We know that a doubter is double minded and unstable, and will not receive anything from you. We confess any doubt we have as sin before you, and ask for forgiveness. Increase our faith daily so that we can move mountains in your name. Amen

Submitted by:

Deaconess Ramona Henriquez

TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2013: Colossians 2:5-6

For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him,

Invisible God, whom no one has seen yet we believe, and have faith in your might, establish our faith so that we shall take root in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church of Colosse did not see Paul in the flesh, however, through faith trusted in Jesus and the power of his resurrection. Keep us steadfast in the cause. We thank you for unyielding faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Submitted by:

Deacon Jerry Henriquez

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2013: James 2:17-18

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Almighty God; Deliver us from our sins since we are all sinners. Cleanse our thoughts and our hearts, by the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Give us a clean heart so that our faith along with our works will be pleasing to thee. Now restore us and give us power to do thy will. Let our works be pleasing in thy sight.

Through Christ our Lord, AMEN

Submitted by:

Sis. Roseann Edwards

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2013: *Isaiah 7:9*

If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.

Lord we bow in humble submission to you, praising you for all the things that you continually do for us. We thank you for the peace in knowing that you are always there. We glorify you for who you are in our lives and, in the lives of those we love. Help us O God to be an example to those we come in contact with, that through word and deed we can show our faith in you. Strengthen us so that we can stand firm in our faith, through good times and bad times.

Help us to be careful, keep calm, and not lose heart because of evil doers. Surround each of us with your Holy Spirit so that we will know when to speak and when to keep silent, when to act and when to stand still. We ask these things so that you will receive all the glory and praise.

In Jesus Name, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Geniece Adams

FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2013: *Psalms 143:1*

*Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness;
answer me in your righteousness.*

Almighty God, hear our plea. Guide and strengthen our faith. Allow us to be faithful to your will and adhere to your way. Teach us to recognize that even in moments of weakness, our strength comes from you. Allow us to remember that you and you alone know what we cannot. This we pray through Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen

Submitted by,

Sis. Brandi T. Hunter

SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2013: Hebrews 10:23-24

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful.*

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

O God, as we hold onto your unchanging hand, it is our faith that guides through our storms. We trust in you Lord. We walk by faith and not by sight. You are an omnipresent, omnipotent God who will never leave us or forsake us. Give us the strength to remain steadfast and true to your word. It is your word, and only your word that will sustain and keep us. There is more power in the hem of your garment, than the world over.

We have to keep our faith because, we know despite ourselves you will always love us, and never leave us. We cannot see you, but we know you live inside us, and teach us that we must be faithful followers, and true believers. We believe by faith that we will forever have your undying love.

Thank you Lord, this is your humbled servant's prayer. Amen

*Submitted by,
Deacon Michael R. Council Sr.*

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2013: Lamentations 3:22-23

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Almighty God, your faithful love never ends, your mercies never cease. Great is your faithfulness, your mercies begin afresh each morning. Lord, increase the faith you have given us and bring us into a harvest worthy of heaven.

God you have conquered the darkness of ignorance by the light of your word. Strengthen within our hearts the faith you have given us. Let not temptation ever quench the fire that your love has kindled within us. Keep us faithful to your law in thought, word, and deed. Be our helper now and always. Free us from sin, and bring us to salvation in that kingdom where you reign. Send your Holy Spirit upon us that we may remain faithful, and do your will in our daily lives, so that we can perfectly love thee and magnify thy holy name.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Rosetta Belton

Perseverance

Don't Feel No Ways Tired

MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2013: Psalm 27:13-14

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Lord, God in the name of Jesus we come to say thank you for your many blessings. We thank you for your kindness, patience, love, and mercy. We appreciate the opportunity to dwell in your presence. We ask Lord, that you continue to be the rock of our salvation. As the poem “Footprints” says, thank you for being our supporter. By carrying us when we ourselves are unaware of how we made it through our challenges, shows your love for us. We recognize that your strength is shown in our weakness therefore; we look to the hills from which cometh our help.

Bless us with the wisdom to see your goodness, which will keep us believing and hoping for eternal life. Help us remember and encourage each other to wait on the Lord, with patient expectation, and fervent prayer. O God, prayer is our key to the throne of grace. Acknowledging your power Lord, assist us with recognizing that we need you.

Lord, when we think about how far we have come, we will continue to persevere on the journey, with our focus on serving the Most High God. Amen

Submitted by:
Sis. Sandra Moss

TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2013: *Philippians 3:4*

Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.

We magnify and rejoice in you, Almighty God. Lord you have smiled upon our souls. By the power of your strength, we are rewarded with patience as we continue to seek your face. Yes Provider, we will work while it is yet day. Yes Sustainer, we will be like the tree planted by the river.

Yes Lord of lords, we will be obedient to your word. And God, when we cannot do anything else, we will persevere in the face of calamities brought on by daily living. Your love gives us the power to push forward. You are an awesome God.

In Jesus name, Amen
Submitted by,
Mother Emma Branch

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2013: *2 Chronicles 15:7*

But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded."

Almighty God; we know that you bless those who revere and delight in your commands. Lord in the midst of inner turmoil or outer conflict, we will not be shaken, for our hearts remain steadfast. We are trusting in you and your overall plan for our lives. Help us Lord to remain firmly grounded, as we overcome the daily obstacles common to all those who live on the earth. Guide us in the valuable lessons we must learn along the way, as we press on toward the goal for which you have called us.

We thank you Lord, for we know that faith alone cannot save us, but your blessing of perseverance in doing good works is the greatest indication of a genuine faith. Through persevering in your works Lord, we as Christians prove our deep appreciation for your saving grace. Your grace will not only enhance the strength of our church, but also build up our strength of character.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen
Submitted by:
Deaconess Yvonne Jones

THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2013: *Psalm 31:24*

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD.

Jesus, your love knows no bounds. And because none was found worthy, you choose to leave your heavenly throne. You came as a babe, blameless, sinless, to save a wretched soul like me. You said if I confess with my mouth, and believe in my heart that you are ready, willing, and able to forgive me of my sins, and cleanse me of all unrighteousness.

Lord, in your earthly journey you preached, taught, and performed miracles giving us the opportunity to turn from our wicked ways. Yet through no fault of your own you were beaten with many stripes, spat upon, nailed on the cross and died. Forgive us lord, and help our unbelief, for in you we live and have life eternal.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by, Deaconess Catherine Britton

FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2013: *Colossians 1:11-13*

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,

Oh God, our God, we thank you for accepting us, and making us heirs to your kingdom. Give us strength to persevere with patience through long-suffering, and enable us to do so with joy. Deliver us from the power of darkness and transform us. Continue to move in our lives and strengthen us to endure until the end, so that we may please, serve, and honor you.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Lunell Whitmire

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2013: Psalm 119:10-11

With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.

Our Dear God, in the name of Jesus, we your humble servants, render our love and gratitude for all you have done. We thank you for your undying love, which keeps us seeking your generosity. With all my heart, I have sought you, do not let me wander from your commandments. Your word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against you.

God, we want to be steadfast, having no desire to wander from thy commandments. Dear God, your words order my footsteps that I might not sin against thee. You are an awesome God. Amen

Submitted by:

Deacon Mark Holmes

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2013: *Isaiah 40:31*

But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Lord Almighty, the one who created the heavens and the earth. You are the Great I AM, and the Sheppard in our lives. We need you in this time of peril and confusion. The world has become so gray and bleak; we need your guidance along the way. Lord we know of your great works, how you helped your people persevere through trials and tribulations. You fed and kept the Israelites during their wandering journey to the promise land, and guided Abram to the land of milk and honey. Lord guide us to the promise land.

Preserve us when our faith is lingering in the dirt, and when our hearts grow faint. Give us a spirit of peace that only you can bring. Guard our minds as we face our demons each day. Make us whole with a fresh anointing that builds our faith, and brings about our strength. Sometimes we choose to fall by the side of the road. Many of us do not know when we will eat our next meal, or how we will pay our rent. Some of us are still waiting for deliverance for others, searching for true salvation or ourselves. We are praying that our hearts can one day be free from strife and pain. Lord we know that you are capable of caring us through. Perseverance is like an obstacle course one must go through in order to win the prize.

Lord enable us to move mountains, give us a mind to control our emotions, the joy to lift us from the pits of darkness and the will power to claim what is rightfully ours. Let us be able to rejoice in our sufferings. Give us the wisdom to know the difference between false hope and true faith. Help us Lord because we are in war, we need your battleship to make it. Lord You are our protector, provider, our rock on solid ground, and the spirit that moves us. We love you, we praise you, and we glorify your name.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by,

Shervahn Williams

Liberation

Thank God Almighty We Are Free at Last

MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2013: *Isaiah 1:17*

*Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,
and plead for the widow.*

Dear Lord, may we adhere to your direction of our lives, through the Holy Spirit, “For if my people obey my commandments and do my will, I will be with you.” Teach us compassion one for another, so that our motives will be pure. Help us to lift up the downtrodden and brokenhearted, so they will be able to overcome any valley experience.

You Oh God have given us the victory, for we are heirs to your heavenly kingdom. The blood of the crucified one, whereby sin will no longer have dominion over us, has cleansed us. We recognize the power of your Word faithfully believing that, “Greater is God that is in me, than they that are in the world.”

This we pray in Jesus name. Amen

Submitted by:

Bro. Carl Sheffield

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2013: Psalm 37:27-28

²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. ²⁸ For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

O God, we thank you for coming to this earth to prepare us for life. In this Lenten season, we reflect on Jesus Christ our friend, whom we recognize as the light of the world. Help us to make our petitions to our Christ together, realizing God will not forsake us as we ask for guidance, protection, and visitation.

We come to Christ with faith and hope, as we pray together and encourage on another. We shall welcome good and forsake evil, as we patiently look for solutions to life's problems. Help us put our trust in an ever-present God, who lived, suffered, died, and arose, sending us a comforter, the Holy Spirit.

We love you Lord, as we remember you at this season of Lent. The Ageless One, taught us how to live, and gave us hope through miracles. Being humble, kind, and very willing to be the ultimate sacrifice to fulfill God's purpose and plan.

We can with hope, encourage each other to pray for guidance, as we look forward for solutions to our problems. Teach us to support each other in prayer, holding to what is good. Encourage us with faith and hope to prayerfully seek solutions to our problems and not give up on God, for God loves us all. As we continue to pray with and for each other with faith, we believe that one day our prayers will be answered. Our Lord is alive forevermore, and hears our prayers. What a mighty God we serve.

Thank you Lord, Amen

Submitted by:

Sis. Henrietta Thompson

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2013: John 8:31-32

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Heavenly God, we come thanking you for all your many blessings. Most of all we thank you for who you are, the creator of the heavens and earth and all within. You are a God who is able to make ways out of seemingly no way. Almighty God as we look back over our lives, we give you all the glory and praise. We know we are not the people we used to be, and could not be the people we are today, if not for your mercy and saving grace.

We were slaves, blinded by the things of this world, and you sent your only begotten son Jesus to be a living sacrifice for all, that we may be set free. Today we receive your Word as truth, and choose to live according to that truth, rather than the ways of this world, for who the Son sets free is free indeed. We love you and give you all the glory and praise.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by, Bro. Steven Sims

THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2013: Matthew 7:12

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

O God, we read in your word, "Judge not, that we should not be judged." God you are our joy, and our salvation, we put all our trust in you. We lift up our eyes toward Heaven, from which cometh our help. As we gather in this holy place, we come giving you all the glory and praise, knowing that you are worthy. We open ourselves to you Lord, asking you to search our hearts and minds. If you find anything not pleasing in your sight, we ask that you remove it.

Lord, our prayer is that you give us the strength to live out the Grace, which you have given us. The guidance of your grace to follow and carry out your Word. Encourage us to treat our brothers and sisters, as we shall like to be treated. We also ask that, through your amazing grace we all become joined together as one.

These things we ask in the sweetest name we know, Jesus. Amen

Submitted by: Jeannine "Penny" Sims

FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2013: Acts 10:34-35

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Almighty, Omniscient God! We understand that you show no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears you and does what is right is accepted. Help us all acknowledge God's love for all people in all nations. Teach us to recognize the human struggle in those we encounter daily. Guide our actions, speech, deeds, and thoughts from passing judgment upon others.

Strengthen our resolve to fulfill the needs of all people. We will continue to revere and praise your mighty name. As was written in Psalm 111:10, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." We yearn to grow in our relationship with you Lord. Thank you for your non-partisan love for us all.

Through Jesus Christ our Savior we pray, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Victoria Gary

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2013: Psalm 37:1-3

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

Sovereign Lord! We will not fret because of those who are evil, or be envious of those who do wrong. We should not be jealous of those who practice or profit from wrongdoing. Help us to realize that your judgment is passed upon the just and unjust. Forgive the sinners of their transgressions.

Restore our trust and faithfulness in your divine plan for all of us. Help us to wait patiently for your judgment in all our dealings. As we await your judgment, keep us obedient to your word, and continue to do well. We long to please you Lord!

We ask these things through Christ our Lord. Amen

Submitted by: Benjamin Gary, Jr.

PALM SUNDAY

MARCH 24, 2013: Isaiah 61:1

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;

Dear Heavenly Creator, we are thanking you for your everlasting love and grace upon us. Your fresh anointing and new mercies each day, allow us to humble ourselves before you, and redeem our souls. You are the Alpha and the Omega, guider of light, the solid foundation for our lives. You are magnificent and glorious beyond all that we can measure.

Today we come to you Lord seeking liberation from our afflictions. Help all those who are frightened, cease from being afraid. May the powerless be granted power to stand up against the forces of principalities.

Lord, we need you to deliver us from thoughts of anguish and despair. Guard our minds so that we may follow you with heavenly thoughts. Unleash the threshold of defeated thinking and negative emotions, and replenish our souls with the gift of salvation and everlasting love. Liberate us from deep within, and rebuild us as a people of virtue and righteousness.

Everywhere we turn, darts are being thrown, and blindness is becoming a plague over our souls. We need the true and living God to free us from ourselves, because we are sinking daily in the mud of destruction. Let freedom ring from within our spiritual hearts, let our eyes overlook the purple valleys, and beyond the blue skies. Thank God Almighty we are free from the depths of hell. Thank God Almighty we are free at last. You are our Savior, and we are free at last.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by:

Sis. Darlene Bright

Guidance

Order My Steps

MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2013: Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Our Savior from above please guide us with the understanding of your word. We need the knowledge of how to love harder & pray smarter. Teach us how to help our fellow brothers and sisters, so that we can stop the violence and deception in the world. Our Savior from above, please guide us with the power to forgive because we feel weak at times, and forgiveness is a great feeling.

Allow us the strength we need to help our fellow brother and sister, because the current world we live in is in dire need of a spiritual healing. Even if it is for a moment, because if we do not the new world will not have a chance to prosper in human kindness. This is a scary thought. Our Savior from above please let the church family guide us on our spiritual journey of happiness, so we can all prosper in our Christian growth with God.

In the name of our Savior above, AMEN

Submitted by,

Sis. Shamara Gonzalez

PASSOVER TUESDAY

MARCH 26, 2013: Psalm 139:23-24

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Most loving and Gracious God: We humbly come before you on one accord to honor, worship, and lift your name on high. O God, we seek your guidance, so that we can be what you desire us to be. Walk with us daily, so that we do not lose our focus. Speak to us so that we will follow the path that which you have prepared for us. Search us O God, and know our hearts test us and know our anxious thoughts. Purge us of anything in us that offends you, and lead us along the path of everlasting life. Continue to Order Our Steps, so that we will be a reflection of you. We thank you Lord for your direction.

In Your Holy Son Jesus Name, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Shawn Carter

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2013: Psalm 25:5

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
For you I wait all day long.*

Most Sovereign God, we praise your name for teaching, guiding, and saving us. Guiding Spirit, thank you for another day. Lead us in the right path so that we may see what you have in store for tomorrow. Compassionate one, we ask for a special blessing on all parents, give them a full understanding of what you want from them as parents. Provide patience when interacting with their children. Finally Lord, bestow peace and assurance to us your people, when we feel that we have failed our children and your word. O God, we trust you and have faith that you can make us great parents. Lord we thank you again for all you do.

In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by: Sis. Sandra Morrison

MAUNDY THURSDAY

MARCH 28, 2013: John 12:35-36

Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Almighty God; Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, the True and Living God. We come before you with open hearts to say thank you. Thank you for your guidance, for we know that we can do nothing without you. Continue to show us the way, so that we can be better spouses, parents, children, and siblings. Most of all make us better Christians.

Give us direction, O Lord. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we can walk right, and do your divine will. You said in your Word that your light would shine for us just a little while longer. Now show us the way O God, so that the darkness of this world will not overtake us. Let your light shine within us so that we can be children of the light.

Lord, we put our trust in the light for we know that you are the light of the world, and we continue to wait on you, realizing that we can do nothing until you come. We open our lives up to you so that it may become like an open book before you. We invite you to write in our book your words of guidance, inspiration, and direction. Forgive us our trespasses and place upon us the spirit of forgiveness, so that we will be able to forgive those who trespass against us.

Mighty God, bless our children, give them direction and guidance so they also may come to know you as Lord and Savior. Keep them safe, protected from hurt, harm, dangers seen, and unseen.

We pray in no other name but the name of Jesus, AMEN

Submitted By: Bro. David A. Walls Sr.

GOOD FRIDAY

MARCH 29, 2013: Psalms 31:3

*You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me.*

O God, the Most High supporter of all, you are our rock and fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide us. In thee, O Lord do we put our trust. Let us never be ashamed. Deliver us in thy righteousness. You are the true fount of wisdom therefore; we release to you all our anxieties and fears, knowing that you alone are able to handle them all. Protect us in every situation and circumstance that we may find ourselves.

Forgive us for all of our sins. Give us understanding as to the direction of our lives. Guide us so that we can become better in our walk with you. Lead us in the way you would have us to go so that your light may shine through us. We need you Jesus and we love you.

In the name of Jesus we pray, AMEN

Submitted By: John Jackson Jr.

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 2013: Matthew 5:16

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Almighty and Gracious Savior, protect us and forgive us when we fall short of your glory. Guide us and deliver us, as we grow in faith. With your kindness and mercy, order our steps. With your love and patience, change our hearts so that we can better serve you, and praise your name. We know that all things are possible through Christ our Lord. Amen

Submitted by,

Pat Holmes

RESURRECTION SUNDAY

MARCH 31, 2013: Psalm 37:23-24

*Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way; though we stumble,
we shall not fall headlong, for the LORD holds us by the hand.*

Almighty God, we love you. Through your only begotten son Jesus the Christ, who defeated death through resurrection, has offered us the opportunity of eternal life. O God of forgiveness, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, please enlarge our understanding of your many blessings, and restore your gift of life within us. As you accepted us when we did not deserve your love, help us to accept those whom we find hard to love. Forgive us, O Lord, for any selfish attitude that we harbor. Help us realize, that the walls we put up for others, only form our own barriers.

O God, during our busy lives, give us times of renewal and peace. Give us the desire to use our spare time to rebuild our bodies, and renew our minds, so our spirits may recognize the goodness of your creation. In all our doubts and fears, grant us the grace to ask what you would have us to do. Grant us the spirit of wisdom, so it may save us from all false choices, and not stray from the path you have provided.

Gracious God, we pray for your holy church, fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is unclean, purify it; when in error, correct it, when in need, provide for it, and when division exists, be the bond that holds it together.

Ever-living God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers. Strengthen the faithful, and restore those who are weak in spirit. Provide all things needed for life, and bring us all together of one mind, within your holy place of worship. Fill us with your love, so we may be of one heart and soul, united in truth, peace, faith, and charity. Allow us to worship as one to glorify you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now as a community of believers, we pray together to you, Almighty and Eternal God. Draw our hearts nearer, that we may be dedicated to you. Mold us, so we may be used always to your glory, and the good of your people.

Through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen

Submitted by:

Lady Lynda Davidson

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, Dale P. *Practical Theology For Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Barnes, F. C. <http://www.ucaonline.org/images/monument/roughside.html> (accessed Feb. 15, 2014).
- Barrick, Audrey. Survey: "Reasons Why Young Adults Quit Church." Christian Post Reporter. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-reasons-why-young-adults-quit-church-28813/> (accessed Dec. 2, 2013).
- Bradley, Rachel Clair. "Generation Events."
<http://www.rachelclairebradley.wordpress.com/2013/12/01/analyzing-generations/>
(accessed Dec. 15, 2013).
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1970.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. *African American Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Crouch, William H. Jr. and Joel C. Gregory. *What We Love About The Black Church: Can I Get A Witness?* Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2010.
- Davis, Bridgeman Valerie, and Safiyah Fosua. *The Africana Worship Book*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006.
- Durham, L. R. *The Secret Power of Prayer*. Nashville: Townsend Press, 2000.
- Encyclopedia.com. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3468300612.html> (accessed Dec. 1, 2013).
- Flake, Floyd H. and M. Elaine McCollins Flake. *Practical Virtues: Everyday Values and Devotions for African American Families*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003.
- Foster, Richard J. *Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.
- Foster, Richard J. and Kathryn A. Helmers. *Celebrating the Disciplines: A Journal Workbook*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

- Freeman's Perspective. "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out-A Modern Interpretation."
<http://www.freemansperspective.com/turn-on-tune-in-drop-out/>(accessed Nov. 23, 2013).
- Gewitz, Paul. On: "I Know It When I See It." *The Yale Law Journal* 105. No.4, 1996.
- Golemon, Larry A. *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*. Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2010.
- Hopewell, James F. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Jones, Joyce. Black Entertainment Television. "Black Unemployment Rose To 13.1 Percent in October. <http://www.bet.com/news/national/2013/11/08/october-black-unemployment-rate.html> (accessed Nov. 28, 2013).
- June, Lee N., ed., *Evangelism & Discipleship in African American Churches*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.
- Lischak, Gabriel. "The Rise of The Megachurch," *The Real Truth*, September 2013,
<http://www.realtruth.org> (accessed Dec. 12, 2013).
- Long, Kimberly Bracken. *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- McDowell, William. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/i-give-myself-away-lyrics-william-mcdowell.html> (accessed Feb. 15, 2014).
- McGee, Gary. Self-Control. http://www.enrichmentjournal.ag.org/top/fruit9_selfcontrol.cfm
 (accessed Dec. 6, 2013).
- McKinney, Lora-Ellen. *Total Praise: An Orientation to Black Baptist Belief and Worship*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003.
- Miller, Kim. *Redesigning Worship: Creating Powerful God Experiences*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.
- Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1907.
- Sapp, Marvin. <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/marvinsapp/neverwouldhavemadet.html> (accessed Feb. 15, 2014).

- Savage, Carl and William Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: a Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities*. Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008.
- Schmidt, Herman, ed. *Prayer and Community*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Sernett, Milton C., ed. *African American Religious History: Documentary Witness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Stookey, Laurence Hull. *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray In Public*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Sweet, Leonard I, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer. *“A” Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.
- Thurman, Howard. *The Creative Encounter*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.
- Tutu, Desmond. *An African Prayer Book*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020> (accessed Nov. 26, 2013).
- Washington, James Melvin. *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Williams, Karen F., and Lloyd Preston Terrell. *Sending Up My Timber: An African American Prayer Journal*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998.
- Williamson, Robert L. *Effective Public Prayer*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1960.
- Wimberly, Anne E. Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- World Council of Churches. “National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/national-baptist-convention-usa-inc> (accessed Oct. 4, 2013)
- Zyromski, Page McKean. *How to Pray With the Bible*. Cape Cod: Paraclete Press, 2010.