“BEGINNING A GOOD WORK”:

EMBRACING THE MODEL OF NEHEMIAH FOR PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

A professional project submitted to the

Theological School of Drew University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree,

Doctor of Ministry

Advisors: Dr. Gary V. Simpson,

Dr. Leonard Sweet

James Henry Alexander

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

May 2021

ABSTRACT

“BEGINNING THIS GOOD WORK”: EMBRACING THE MODEL OF NEHEMIAH FOR PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

James Henry Alexander

Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church

Greenville, North Carolina

This project explores the onset of pastor – church relationships in a Black Church context and how a re-signing of each's identity establishes a healthy partnership foundation. Considering the absence of resources to guide the initial term of pastor-church partnerships, the project seeks to offer a viable framework to navigate said partnership through the initial stages. Using the historic Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church as the immediate context, this project invites congregations and pastors alike to be curious concerning how the pre-existing images of their roles intersect and the subsequent impact upon the pastor, church, and community. I propose that pastors' and people's identities must mirror Christ and each other; the subsequent image is a pastor-prophet synthesis. The pastor-prophet synthesis embodies the work and witness of Christ to the world while fostering a system of sharing amongst the three parties. Particularly related to the pastor and church partnership, this sharing system invites each to function as "a part of," instead of "apart from" each other. To substantiate this theory, I employed the postmodern narrative approach at the onset of my pastoral journey with Sycamore Hill, using the Nehemiah principle as a working framework. I assert that Nehemiah offers a tangible image of multi-tiered partnerships that create meaningful narratives while accounting for the "terroir" of the context.

The project employed a facsimile of the process found in Nehemiah to explain how congregational and pastoral narratives are shaped over time and challenges that could arise. Despite the project's organic nature indicating that a complete account of its impact would not be determined for years, the project does offer Nehemiah's approach as a viable, flexible framework that emphasizes the importance of communication and collaboration. Furthermore, the project does yield commentary concerning the ways fluidity must be addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the final segment's deployment, forcing both pastor and church to confront the adjustments necessary to remain relevant and relational towards Christ, the community, and each other.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I believe, due to the nature of this undertaking, that it has been a lifetime in the making. As such, I find it apt to express my gratitude to the different persons and places that have informed my narrative. I am most grateful to God for the daily encounters of steadfast love, and reminding me of "whose" I am, while exploring "who" I am. To my beloved church family, the Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church; I am honored to partner with you on this journey to becoming. To each member of my advisory committee, thank you for sharing of your time, your talents, and your support. I acknowledge the privilege I've had over this journey to sit at the feet of wise counsel, scholars and professors who pushed me to explore and be curious concerning pastoral identity. To Doctor Leonard Sweet, Doctor Noel Erskine, and Doctor Bernard Lafayette, and much obliged! To my fellow cohort members, I am honored to have shared space with you over the last 3 years.

I am ever mindful of my foundation; I will be forever indebted to the Calvary Baptist Church of Morristown, New Jersey for affirming my gifts far before I recognized them for myself. To those whom I've had the privilege to call "pastor": Doctor Gary V. Simpson, Doctor Jerry M. Carter, Jr., and the late Doctor Orlando K. Winters Sr., thank you for affording me the opportunity to watch, learn, and ask questions. I am also appreciative for Doctor Felicia Jamison and Mabel Davis, for investing considerable, invaluable time in my journey and expanding my horizons. Any conversation concerning

home, also requires the acknowledgement of my “cloud of witnesses” who will forever be in my heart: James and Ellnap Hill, Henry and Essie Mae Alexander, JoAnn Hill, Rodney Herbert, Carl Davis, Charles “Moose” Jamison and James Vance. To Mother Morehouse: Thank you for the encounters there that provoked the early onset of my pastoral-prophetic engagement. To those I’ve been privileged to call close friends, extended family and colleagues, thank you for your support and the space provided to perform this work. It is greatly appreciated.

I find it befitting to save the best for last. Thank you to my parents, Jesse and Belinda Alexander, for being my first, and continued representation of God’s love. To my brothers, Jesse and Christopher Alexander, thank you for holding me down and pushing me to never settle. To my bride, the love of my life Amanda, you made this journey possible! Thank you for walking beside me during this adventurous, intense, sometimes isolated journey.

Chapter One

"Send Me to Judah": The Call to Pastoral Leadership

In 1970, while vacationing in the Bahamas, Motown Records founder Berry Gordy, Jr. received an urgent phone call from Marvin Gaye, one of his artists. Gaye, expressing excitement concerning the album he is working on, indicates the title track is a protest song, to which Gordy responds: "Why do you want to ruin your career? Why do you want to put out a song about the Vietnam War, police brutality, and all of these things? You've got all these great love songs. You're the hottest artist, the sex symbol of the sixties and seventies…'"[1] However, Gaye would not be denied. Fueled by the impact of the stories heard from his brother Frankie, a soldier returning home from the Vietnam conflict, and the state of disarray prevalent in Detroit's streets, Gaye refuses to record for Motown again until given the green light to record. When he did not receive such permission, Gaye circumvents Gordy and gets the title track to the album released on January 17, 1971. By the 21st, all 100,000 copies of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" were sold out to incredible demand, making it the fastest-selling single in Motown history.

The song itself, frequently misinterpreted as a question, is a definitive statement, commentary to the *goin' ons* of society, punctuated by the presence of war, socio-economic disparity, and racial inequality. In truth, it could be imagined as a modern-day

[1] Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves, and Demons of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 61.

prophetic utterance, with Gaye, the son of a Pentecostal preacher, assuming the imagery of "*mouthpiece*" informing the masses.

> *Mother, mother; there's too many of you crying*
> *Brother, brother, brother; there's far too many of you dying*
> *You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today*
> *Father, father; we don't need to escalate*
> *You see, war is not the answer; for only love can conquer hate*
> *You know we've got to find a way, to bring some lovin' here today,*
> *Picket lines and picket signs; don't punish me with brutality*
> *Talk to me, so you can see, oh, what's going on*[2]

Although this utterance provides a painful portrait of "what is," Gaye invites the audience to partner with him in exploring the "what could be" if the audience chooses to participate in changing the environment in which they are immersed. It is important to note that this clarion call marks a drastic departure from Gaye's image to this point in his career. Gaye traditionally produced love ballads, pop singles, and soulful duets with the likes of Tammi Terrell and Kim Weston. However, the experience of losing his singing mate Terrell in 1970, coupled with the stories shared by his brother, prompts a shift in his vocal renderings, mirrored in the fluidity of his identity, as a response to the conditions of the world he could no longer ignore. In *Mercy, Mercy, Me: The Arts, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye,* Michael Eric Dyson states that "Marvin's sense of vocation was transformed as well; he withdrew into existential rumination and musical brooding.

---

[2] Marvin Gaye, vocalist, "What's Going On.," by Renaldo Benson, Al Cleveland, and Marvin Gaye, recorded June 1970, track 1 on *What's Going On*, Motown Records, vinyl LP.

Except for a few recordings, he didn't reemerge until he had been remade in the shape of his restored, perhaps redeemed, artistic vision."[3]

The mirroring of Gaye's vocation to his identity is an apt metaphor for how I self-identify and function in my vocation as a pastor. Akin to Gaye, several direct and indirect experiences have informed my narrative; as my narrative shifted, so did my image of pastoral identity. Anne Streaty Wimberly, in her work *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, identifies the different dynamics that impact our narratives, such as

- Social contexts in which we live and engage in the affairs of life
- Past and present relationships with persons
- Life events taking place in our social contexts and emerging out of our relationships that remain vivid in our memories
- Meanings we assign to our lives[4]

Wimberly states:

> "We approach life and act on life according to the meanings we add to all of the above components of our lives. In addition, how we choose to act contributes to how every part of our lives unfolds. This makes up our unfolding story plot. We may see life optimistically or we may see life in negative terms and approach it in destructive ways. How we see life becomes the undergirding theme in our lives and strongly influences how we act. This gives unique character to our unfolding plot."[5]

As each track on the "What's Going On" album gives voice to the progressive fluidity of Gaye's personal and professional narrative, a need to frame how that fluidity is communicated becomes necessary. In *The Changing Signs of Truth,* author Crystal

---

[3] Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me,* 46.

[4] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 40-42.

[5] Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 42.

Downing provides such a framework. Downing argues how semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, communicates meaning across different cultures and contexts. Using the metaphor of a map providing guidance to a set destination, Downing states that akin to the map requiring constant updates to account for inevitable changes to the terrain or route for future travelers, signs and symbols must be updated or re-signed to offer guidance for finding meaning in light of the fluidity existing in cultures and contexts.

This re-signing is not limited to physical environments, however. The act of re-signing also extends to one's personal experience. Particularly related to pastoral ministry, while the destination or end goal of leading persons to Christ remains the same, the context, culture, and challenges change. This, in turn, requires the pastor to adapt to remain relevant and relational. In light of this, I readily identify three distinct “adaptations” that offer conversation towards how my pastoral identity adjusted: my childhood search for identity, my collegiate search for identity, and my present-day search for identity.

My earliest image of pastoral identity came in the form of my father. I grew up as the 2nd of 3 sons born to Jesse and Belinda Alexander in Succasunna, New Jersey. My father, a native of Mississippi, and my mother, a native of New Jersey, served in the Diaconate at the Calvary Baptist Church in Morristown, which was a 27-minute commute from our home in Succasunna. Founded in 1889, Calvary at the time was a congregation of approximately 500 members, mostly commuters from surrounding towns. My parents were very active in the church's life, which meant that my brothers and I would also be very busy. We usually spent 5-6 days there weekly, participating in a variety of ministries

and, of course, Sunday worship. On Sunday mornings, we would be awakened to the sound of my father's baritone voice, raising a metered hymn as we got prepared for travel. Songs like “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,”; “A Charge to Keep I Have,” and “Just Another Day That the Lord Has Kept Me” were sung frequently and with gusto. In later conversations with my father, he expressed those songs as his favorites because they embodied his story. As the oldest of 16 in Greenwood, Mississippi, he spent his formative years working as a sharecropper. Relocating to New Jersey in 1961, my father parlayed his work ethic into a stable career. He would always remark in prayer that it was “by the hand of the Lord” that we were afforded the privileges we had; thus, those three songs, along with countless others, became the soundtracks of his life. They also set the tone for the worshipping space we were entering.

Upon arrival at Calvary, my father shifted from “dad” to “Deacon Alexander.” His Sunday School classes were well attended, and that same booming, baritone voice that awakened us each morning was now filling the Mahalia Jackson fellowship hall. He was very personable and community oriented. We saw evidence of this in the frequent visits that members would make to our home, often to discuss church, life events, and mostly eat. In many ways, our house was my father's pulpit, and the congregation was comprised of individuals who came seeking faith, food, and fellowship. It conjures up parallels to Eugene Peterson, who reflects upon the image of his father working in a butcher shop. He recalls:

> That butcher shop was my introduction to the world of the congregation, which in a few years would be my workplace as a pastor. The people who came into our ship were not just customers. Something else defined them. It always seemed

> more like a congregation than a store. My father in his priestly robe greeted each person by name and knew many of their stories. And many of them knew me, in my priest's robe, by name. I always knew there was more going on than a commercial transaction.[6]

My father was a stabilizing force in the church during the late 80s, as the congregation went without a pastor. As chairman of the deacon board, he was responsible for discharging the pastor's duties in absentia; he served communion, visited the sick, tended to the needs of those who were encountering troubles, and anything else requested of him, save preaching. To this day, I can recall the late Rachel Jones, a longtime member of the church vividly, saying out loud to no one in particular, "Deacon Alexander should be a pastor." This viewpoint or priestly robe image was not merely inclusive of my father; it extended to me as well. Of my siblings, I am the one who closely resembles my father physically and in mannerisms and personality.

Given that multi-tiered resemblance, I interpreted their belief that my father would be a pastor as a clear indication that they believed I would become one as well. This belief was reaffirmed by their constant remarks that I "had some preaching" within me. Indeed, I was not ashamed of my father or my family; however, the frequent comparisons to my father and my older brother and the subsequent pressure to live up to those images resulted in a very fluid, underdeveloped sense of my own identity.

---

[6] Eugene Peterson, *Pastor: A Memoir* (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 39.

Whereas my father embraced serving God and God's people in a myriad of roles, I was very uncomfortable in the roles I filled, to the degree that this "calling," of which I internalized as something nonsensical, I chose to ignore. "How can I," I often thought to myself, "become a preacher when I have no idea who I am as a person?" Some preachers make a popular statement that they "stopped running from Jesus"; however, I never ran; I merely chose to ignore the gradual promptings that would reveal themselves on occasion. The late Reverend Gardner C. Taylor, the former pastor of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ, summed my feelings up accurately in an interview he gave in 2011:

> I have known a great deal of solitude. My religious experience has been primarily the Lord's pursuit of me, and I've been elusive sometimes. Sometimes he's trapped me. It hasn't always been pleasant. There are ways I would have run better if I could have.[7]

I had a relationship with God, albeit an uncomfortable one. It was difficult for me to establish a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God and understand my life's purpose without understanding my identity. This discomfort with identity and ministry followed me to Morehouse College, where I entered in the Fall semester of 2000. Here, for the first time, I had the opportunity to explore who I was, outside of the shadow of my family, and the perceptions of who I was to become. However, at Morehouse, as Reverend Taylor stated, the Lord "trapped me."[8]

---

[7] Marshall Shelley and Michael Washington. "Preaching When Parched," *Christianity Today,* Fall 2011, https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2011/fall/whenparched.html.)

[8] Shelly and Washington, *Preaching When Parched*.

Founded in 1867 in the Springfield Baptist Church's basement in Augusta, Georgia, Morehouse College was established to prepare black men for ministry and teaching careers. At the urging of Reverend Frank Quarles, then pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church, the school relocated to Atlanta. From there, the college flourished to offer higher education for a wide gamut of career offerings. In its growth, however, Morehouse never shifted far from its humble roots. There was a notable air of spirituality and mysticism permeating the campus; during the Freshmen Orientation, this atmosphere was identified as the "Morehouse Mystique." The late Maynard Jackson, former mayor of the city of Atlanta and Morehouse Alumnus, describes it as

> This value system that was Morehouse, I mean it was just, from the moment you stepped on campus, you could feel it oozing out of the bricks of Graves Hall and Sale Hall, and the heroes who taught us. Morehouse is a great school; it always has been. It builds leaders; it builds men.[9]

Morehouse represented the first time that I was immersed in a context that looked like me. The town I was reared in, Succasunna, was and remains primarily Caucasian. As of the last census, the percentage of Black or African American persons taking residence was approximately 4%.[10] Up through high school, I cannot recall more than two classes where I was not the only Black student present. Morehouse was also the school that produced the hero of my adolescence: Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Now walking the same campus as Doctor King provided me with a sense of belonging, that this was where

---

[9] *The Story of a People: The Morehouse Mystique.* Directed by Mary Major. 1997, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnUuFU9vZIE.

[10] Data retrieved from United States Census Bureau website: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/roxburytownshipmorriscountynewjersey

I needed to be to become who I was to become. Ironically, however, I did not pursue religion as a major; I pursued Business Administration with no end career in mind.

Two critical experiences at Morehouse influenced my decision to embrace this unclear calling. The first was my Track and Field participation, where I competed as a thrower for three seasons. We practiced as a team twice a day: once at 4:30 AM and once at 4:30 PM. Once the second practice ended, I would spend additional hours practicing in the throwing circle. On an isolated hill separate from the track, this circle became solitude; it allowed me a safe space to commune with God like never before, working out my issues and angst concerning my presumed identity. That space also informed me of the value of interdependence, in contrast to independence. As a thrower, I was solely responsible for my performance in my events; I was depended on to place in the discus throw, hammer throw, shot put, and javelin throw. However, whatever placement I achieved contributed points to the overall team score, which would impact the competition's outcome as a whole. Before college, I wanted my identity to be entirely independent of my father. However, my experience as a thrower informed me to begin embracing the idea that being aligned with my father's identity was less about conformity and more about identifying strong positive traits to affirm.

The second critical experience that occurred at Morehouse was joining the Mount Moriah Baptist Church. Located across the street from Morehouse's campus, Mount Moriah was a historic church with active roots in the Civil Rights movement and West End community. It was similar in some respects to Calvary, a large, affluent congregation

that was friendly, community-oriented, and loved music. The membership consisted mostly of adults aged 50 -70 and college students from the surrounding Atlanta University Center. The pastor, the late Doctor Orlando K. Winters, was a physically imposing man with a gregarious personality to match. He reminded me much of Doctor Gary V. Simpson, Taylor's successor at Concord and my former pastor at Calvary, in character. Both emphasized building programs and people. I later discovered that they were well acquainted, which lent some comfort to serving under his watch. He identified my angst concerning ministry; yet gave me the space to serve and figure things out.

Doctor Winters also provided for me a second, albeit humbling, image of pastoral identity. Doctor Winters served the Mount Moriah church for a total of 19 years. His predecessor, the late Doctor Howard Creecy was considered a legend in Atlanta due to his fiery preaching and activity during the Civil Rights Movement. Leaving Mount Moriah in 1991 to start the Olivet Baptist Church of Christ in Fayetteville, Georgia, Doctor Creecy left behind a congregation that was both in mourning and strife. Upon his arrival, Doctor Winters became responsible for navigating the congregation through their grief, albeit in a distinctly different package than his predecessor, who served 20+ years. The differences extended from physical appearance to preaching style, and while he was the pastor in title, he would remark in private that it became years before he became the pastor in their minds. Doctor Winters was cheerful on the surface, always smiling and cracking jokes to anyone within proximity to him. However, as I discovered, he dealt with depression and burnout, mainly stemming from the pressures of serving this unique

congregation. Much of his cheerful, joking nature was authentic to him; part of it, however, was a coping mechanism.

During my senior year at Morehouse, I was as active in Mount Moriah as I had been at Calvary. This time, it was not by coercion or parental pressure; instead, I was drawn to participate. I began to conceive in my mind that this desire to be active was a byproduct of heightened sensitivity to my spirituality, as well as the mandates of expectation Morehouse placed upon its students to be community oriented. It created internal tension as I was wrestling with what I was being pulled to, juxtaposed with the context's expectations. I still maintained the rigid practice schedule from Track and Field; I would leave practice and hurriedly make my way to Mount Moriah for ministry meetings or church functions. In September of 2003, while completing practice, I experienced a debilitating hamstring injury, which kept me sidelined for five months. During that period, the throwing circle, which had become my “de facto” safe space and sanctuary to commune with God, was now off-limits. This experience triggered a period of depression and anger towards God for “permitting” this painful experience to occur. One evening in December, while preparing to travel back to New Jersey for the holidays, I finally broke down and confronted God in the isolation of my dorm room. It was a raw, painful, yet cathartic experience in which I verbalized my pain in not readily articulating my identity. At the moment, the images of the pastoral figures I had experienced: Simpson, Doctor Jerry M. Carter, Jr., Simpson's successor at Calvary, Winters, and my father flooded my mind. On bended knee, in the dorm room, I began to sing for the first time the song I've heard my father sing so many mornings in my childhood:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim thru' this barren land.

In each line of the first verse, I imagined singing it the same way I've heard my father sing it; in the African American tradition of call and response, raising my volume after each line and repeating with increased intensity:

I am weak Lord, but thou art mighty; Hold me with thy powerful hand.

Through the tears of affirmation that finally sprang forth, after a lifetime of waiting, this song, my father's soundtrack, was now becoming my soundtrack.

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven. Feed me 'til I want no more.[11]

I finally felt what the senior members of Calvary had known, what my family had known, even what some of my friends had known: my calling was to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I decided to wait until Christmas to share the news with my family; I chose the upcoming Sunday to speak with Doctor Winters. As I shared my experience with Doctor Winters and his wife Patricia, his jovial response was authentic to who I knew him to be: "Negro, what took you so long?" We prayed together, and he gave me instructions to commence ministerial training upon my return to Atlanta after the holiday season. On Christmas day, 2004, I shared with my family that I had acknowledged my ministry call. Excited and delighted, my parents began, to my chagrin, calling every person they knew

---

[11] William Williams. "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," *The New National Baptist Hymnal,* Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, September 2005, 234.

to share the news. When it was announced at Calvary, the embrace I experienced from my community of faith was one that not only affirmed me but also gave me a sense of relief. No longer was I fearful of succumbing to the pressure of living up to the image of my father; now, I felt my identity could stand and develop on its own merits.

My return to Atlanta was met with an urgency to commence ministerial training. Each of the individuals that I've identified as my pastoral images stressed the need for further education as I was preparing to graduate from Morehouse. In May of 2005, hours after receiving my degree[12], I preached my "trial" sermon at Mount Moriah. Family, friends, classmates, and members of my home church comprised the audience. This experience reinforced the church community's image as a family, which started with the frequent visits that the community would make to my childhood home for fellowship. Doctor Winters provided an extensive list of books to read, research and present among the other ministers in training. He believed that being well-read and well-spoken would lend itself to managing the different scenarios we would encounter during our ministerial journey. He emphasized the need to make preaching relatable; he often stated that the Bible must always be placed in conversation with the newspaper or current events to "make it plain." Conversely, he introduced me to a new image of Christ via Black Liberation Theology, which began to disrupt and reshape how I interpreted Christ, and the work of Christ among the church.

[12] My Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration was officially conferred in December of 2004; due to no commencement services held during the Winter semester, I participated in the commencement services for the following Spring.

Black theology concerns itself with God's relatedness to the plight of the oppressed: in this instance, Black persons of African descent. James Cone nuances it in the context of liberation as

> a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the Gospel but is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused… It is impossible to speak of the God of Israelite history, who is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that God is the God of and for those who labor and are over laden.[13]

Aligning the plight of oppressed Blacks in the modern context to that of the Hebrews in Exodus, Cone formulates a new Christ image aligned and acutely aware of black oppression, as Christ himself experienced oppression. This notion re-signed the traditional idea of Christ I was familiar with, a tall, Caucasian male with brown hair, blue eyes into a Christ who resembled my blackness. I was accustomed to seeing it; it was present in my paternal grandmother's family room in Greenwood, Mississippi, and visible in the home of the fictional Evans family on the television show *Good Times*. The last image I've never seen, yet I felt familiar with it.

---

[13] James Hal Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1970), 1.

The ability to re-sign Christ as a Black man, experiencing some of the hardships I have encountered, began to expose the gospel ministry as a ministry of liberation. It also began to lend a framework to the fluidity of my identity. This experience of self-identification coincided with the need to re-sign the image of the church. After becoming licensed, Doctor Winters began training me intensely to function as his protégé. He required me to be present for leadership meetings, church conferences, funerals, and weddings. My presence was not limited to merely being in the space; I was invited to participate in intentional and visible ways. I also began pursuing my Master of Divinity from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. This event marked another point of departure from the ever-looming shadow of my father and brother. Upon starting class, I became the first person in my immediate and extended family to pursue and eventually earn a graduate degree. However, with this newfound access to the church's inner workings came a need to re-sign how I viewed the church. The congregation worshipped together in the sanctuary each Sunday, joined together in ministry and appeared to be unified. However, juxtaposed with this image of coexistence was the image of dragged-out, explosive church conferences that yielded hostilities, humiliation, and scars on both pastor and people. Over time, the church membership aged and dwindled, mainly due to changes in the local community. The decrease in membership coincided with a decline in revenue, of which the congregation directed their ire towards Doctor Winters.

In addition to managing a church in transition, Winters balanced his responsibilities as a professor, husband, father, and Moderator of the Atlanta Missionary

Baptist Association. Everything came to a head one morning. Doctor Winters notes in his doctoral project *Pastoral Burnout in the Black Church in the New Era State Baptist Convention*:

> Then one morning, like every other morning, I got up to prepare for the usual day but something different happened. On my way to the bedroom, I felt a little strange, odd, sick and just a little dizzy. I continued walking and fell down. On my way down to the floor, I hit my head on the comer of the dresser. The only thing I really remember after that was the house was in an uproar. My wife Patricia quickly took me to the hospital. Fortunately, my children were at school and did not witness what had taken place. At the hospital, I discovered that I was burned-out from my busy lifestyle. It left me with high blood pressure.[14]

Less than a month later, Doctor Winters suffered the first of two debilitating strokes. The second stroke occurred two years later, less than five days after he ordained me. I assumed his upcoming preaching obligations, taught Bible Study and performed counseling and care for the members. This left me with a conflicted view of pastoral ministry and the church, for this was the first time I have seen any of the pastoral figures I knew encounter "occupational hazards." Winters' strokes ultimately led to his early retirement and early death at the age of 52. My soundtrack in the season changed; I was angry with the congregation for their treatment of him and wrestled with staying or departing for a situation more in tune with my image of the church. I found myself now playing a new soundtrack in my head:

> *What do I do, when I don't know what to do? What do I say, when I don't know what to say?*
> *Where do I turn, what are the answers to those questions that seem to have no answer?*

---

[14] Orlando K. Winters, *Pastoral Burnout in the Black Church in the New Era State Baptist Convention* (Ashland: Ashland Theological Seminary, 2009), 5.

I'll stand still, until your will is clear to me[15]

In June of 2011, after wrestling for nearly a year, I decided that I had been still long enough and made my departure from Mount Moriah.

For the next eight months, I wandered from church to church in search of a context that closely reflected my needs. Ultimately, I received an invitation from the Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church in Greenville, North Carolina, to apply for their Assistant Pastor / Youth Pastor position. In May of 2012, I relocated to Greenville upon accepting the offer. Relocation marked a departure of sorts, as for the first time, I was physically removed from my immediate family. Cornerstone, like Calvary and Mount Moriah, was a prominently known church in its region. Primarily Black in its ethnic makeup, the church was known for its music ministry, outreach, and state-of-the-art facilities. It was located in a college town that was rapidly growing; the church campus was less than 4 miles from East Carolina University and Vidant Medical Center. The Senior Pastor, the late Sidney A. Locks, had served for over 19 years but was recovering from a debilitating illness. My role was to restructure the youth ministry and provide support to Pastor Locks. Less than a week in my position, Pastor Locks entered my office, closed the door behind him, and informed me that he was retiring at the end of the

[15] Rev. Ernest Davis, Jr.'s Wilmington Chester Mass Choir, "Stand Still (Until Your Will Is Clear)," August 10,1992, track 1 on *Stand Still (Until Your Will Is Clear)*, 1992, compact disc.

month. The tone of his voice suggested that this retirement was not of his choosing; however, he felt obligated to make me aware, as he was responsible for calling me to the church. The following day, the chair of the Board of Directors met with me and asked me to assume the Senior Pastor responsibilities, albeit on an indefinite basis. At the same time, the church determined its next steps. I was hesitant to say yes because I was still scarred from witnessing Doctor Winters' experience. However, with the situation so closely resembling what I came out of, I believed God equipped me for this congregation, and I consented.

The change in responsibilities brought immediate highs and lows. I began to emphasize preaching, teaching and creating programs geared towards addressing the ills afflicting the congregation members. In my view, the church functions authentically as the church when it is concerned for the oppressed. Although Cornerstone was one of the more affluent Baptist churches in the region, many of its members encountered oppression in various forms, from racism, predatory lending, sexism to gentrification. This emphasis appeared to garner a positive response amongst the congregation and the community. I also maintained my responsibilities as Youth Pastor. However, the abrupt retirement of Pastor Locks brought about conflict, as I discovered that there were breakdowns in communication between him and the Board of Directors. This relationship breakdown led many to believe that his retirement was not his choice, and I was brought in to replace him. I was not adequately prepared to engage the conflicts that came with pastoral leadership head-on; I began adopting poor eating habits, lack of sleep, and pushing myself to fulfill all the demands asked of me. While I was undertaking the Senior

Pastor responsibilities, I was not the Senior Pastor in title. Eventually, as the church prepared to launch its pastoral search process, I found myself reverting to the same soundtrack I assumed at Mount Moriah during Doctor Winters' illness. I was offered the opportunity to apply, but it was clear that I was not in their plans. I consulted with my father, Simpson and Carter. The result was the same; I could no longer stand still and relocated back to Atlanta.

My transition back to Atlanta was a time of introspection. I was forced to take an honest look at myself; however, the proverbial mirror to which I was beginning to see my identity clearly, had now become foggy and unclear. I was disturbed, feeling that a series of poor experiences had disrupted all the progress towards my purpose. I struggled with a sense of guilt, as doubt concerning whether God called me to pastoral ministry filled my mind. A number of my friends recommended transitioning solely into a corporate vocation; by this time, I was working for Apple, Inc. They expressed their concern over my appearance and the absence of joy that generally accompanied me. Their words of caution hearken back to Eugene Peterson and the commissioning of his portrait. The artist, Willi Ossa, had what Peterson referred to as an "outraged hostility"[16] towards the church, based upon his personal experiences. As he painted, he would not allow Peterson to view it until completion. Peterson describes the revealing of the portrait:

> He had painted me in a black pulpit robe, seated with a red Bible on my lap, my hands folded over it. The face was gaunt and grim, the eyes flat and without expression. I asked him about Mary's *Krank*. He said that she was upset because

[16] Eugene Peterson, *Pastor: A Memoir.* New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, pg.163.

> he had painted me as a sick man. “And what did you answer her?” He said, “I told her that I was paining you as you would look in twenty years if you insisted on being a pastor.” And then, “Eugene, the church is an evil place. No matter how good you are and how good your intentions, the church will suck the soul out of you. I'm your friend. Please, don't be a pastor.[17]

My friends expressed similar sentiments. They wanted the best for me and believed the church would be more of a burden than a blessing. The point of divergence is whereas Ossa had a negative experience with the church, many of my friends offering advice were fellow clergy, struggling with similar experiences. At that time, one dissenting voice from the rest encouraged me to keep pushing: my wife, Amanda.

Amanda and I had met at Mount Moriah in 2003; her grandfather was an associate minister serving under Doctor Winters, and her grandmother was president of the Usher Board. Amanda was a military child who had experienced a significant amount of transition in her life. She had lived in 4 different states during her childhood, graduating from high school in Keflavik, Iceland. Amanda acknowledged her call to ministry months after I did; her collegiate journey took her to Tennessee State University, then to Columbus State University, where she graduated. For the eight-plus years we were together, it was a long-distance courtship. Relocating back to Atlanta provided me with someone who knew me intimately and could offer a fresh perspective on my struggles. We were married the week I returned to Atlanta; in between wedding planning, she encouraged me to apply for churches local to Georgia. She also introduced me to a book she was researching as part of her coursework at the McAfee School of Theology: Henri

---

[17] Peterson, *Pastor*,164.

J. Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*. The chapter "Ministry by A Lonely Minister" began to clear away the fog from the mirror of my identity. Nouwen recounts an old legend found in the Talmud, which references Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi interacting with Elijah, the prophet. The Rabbi inquires about the Messiah's arrival; in response, Elijah points him towards the city's gates. He remarks that the Messiah would be sitting amongst the wounded poor, unbinding and then binding their wounds, one at a time. Nouwen continues:

> The Messiah, the story tells us, is sitting among the poor, binding his wounds one at a time, waiting for the moment when he will be needed. So, it is too with the minister. Since it is his task to make visible the first vestiges of liberation for others, he must bind his own wounds carefully in anticipation of the moment when he will be needed. He is called to be the wounded healer, the one who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others. He is both the wounded minister and the healing minister…[18]

I reflected on these words and the image presented during my honeymoon. As we enjoyed days on the beach in Honolulu, I began to consider how I entered each context with the desire to "bind the wounds of others" without actually tending to my own. The insecurities of my childhood struggle with my identity, coupled with the hurts I experienced in each context, had left wounds that remained exposed for all intents and purposes. I began to consider how easy it was for me to walk away from both contexts, although I was very well acquainted with the reality that any type of ministry would encounter some degree of hardship. With my wife gently prodding, I decided to push

---

[18] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York City: Knof Doubleday Publishing Group, 1972), 83-84.

forward and begin candidating for churches, holding fast to the image of the wounded healer / wounded minister as a concrete representation of my identity. For the duration of my ministerial journey, I acknowledged my role as a minister as one who helps others, repeatedly at my expense. It conjured images of Winters, who chose to ignore his wounds and focus on the wounds of his congregation. He believed that was the appropriate method of practicing pastoral ministry, and in a sense, gave his life for it. If I were to continue on this path to pastoral ministry, however, I could not neglect my wounds; otherwise, I would become guilty of bleeding my issues onto the people I was charged to serve.

In June of 2015, I was called to serve the Zion Hill Baptist Church in Newnan, Georgia. Located in Coweta County, Newnan reflected a town in transition. Incorporated in 1828, Newnan blossomed due to an economy rooted in agriculture, specifically cotton. An investment in a railroad system in the mid-1800s brought forth prosperity that culminated in the design and construction of elaborate homes and buildings. Relatively untouched by the Civil War, these historic homes and buildings still stand today, thus giving Newnan its nickname, the “City of Homes.”

Zion Hill recently celebrated 122 years of service to the community in which it is located, the Chalk Level Association. One of 6 historical districts in Newnan, Chalk Level is comprised of Savannah, Farmer, Robinson, Dewey, and Pinson Streets. In the early 1970s, residents recall that Pinson Street, where the church is physically located, maintained an affluent image; it was home to many young, white-collar Black families in

Newnan. This image was reinforced by the appearance of homes that architecturally were constructed in the old Victorian style. However, the idea of the street, and its inhabitants, has been re-signed negatively. Many of those old Victorian homes are now boarded up, broken down, and in dire need of repair. Once occupied by doctors and lawyers, some homes are now "trap houses" that attract illicit activity daily. The young, affluent owners have given way to senior citizens on fixed incomes, section 8 occupants, and streetwalkers, struggling to maintain rising property tax payments in the midst of meeting other personal needs.

The re-signing of Pinson Street is reflected in the history of Zion Hill. In 1898, Reverend H.R. Bennett and a small group of worshippers began worshipping regularly in a hall on Pinson Street. Having purchased a land plot on the same street for $150, the group broke ground and began building the Zion Hill Baptist Church. In 1899, the church received the deed to the property. Nine pastors led the church[19] between 1898 and 1972. In 1973, as Pinson Street was becoming known as an affluent area, the status was mirrored at Zion Hill, coinciding with the calling of Willie J. Johnson to become the 11th pastor. A native of Coweta County, Reverend Johnson served Zion Hill for 39 years as its longest-tenured pastor. A builder by trade, Reverend Johnson designed and built the current edifice and created intentional relationships with the surrounding community to stimulate growth. He also implemented ministries, trained young ministers, and established a comprehensive

[19] The Reverend H.H. Anderson pastored Zion Hill twice: once for part of 1916, and then again from 1923 – 1943.

Christian education program. Those works led to Zion Hill experiencing its most extensive growth period. It became known as the "status church," primarily due to the white-collar black families that attended regularly. However, as it grew in stature, members note that it also began to distance itself from the immediate community.

The Pinson Street and Chalk Level areas began to decline in the early 2000s. Younger families began to relocate outside of the community, choosing to work and worship in larger, metropolitan cities. Many of the plants were closed, leaving former employees unable to find jobs their limited education would qualify them for. The congregation also aged; by 2012, the membership dropped from about 300 active persons to about 150. What was once considered the vibrant, affluent church of Newnan became a reflection of the community in which it was based; aged, dying, and unable to adapt to the changing times. In 2012, the church experienced significant trauma in the loss of their primary church leaders:

- Chair of Trustee Board James Gay (June 1, 2012)
- Pastor Willie J. Johnson (December 30, 2012)
- Chair of Deacon Board Terry Jones (January 12, 2013)

Reverend Johnson's health declined over the last ten years; members recount that he would often lie down on the couch in his office to muster the strength to preach during Sunday services. He was present and preaching, but his health prevented him from managing the church's administrative aspect. The deaths of Trustee Gay and Deacon Jones were just as devastating; for the duration of Reverend Johnson's tenure, the church's leadership operated top-heavy, with those three performing the majority of the work. With no succession plan or trained leadership in place, the church went 2.5 years

without a pastor. They rotated between the associate ministers to supply the pulpit. However, the lack of a steady, stable pastoral leadership led to a more dramatic decline in membership, to fewer than 100 active persons.

My family's arrival at Zion Hill in June of 2015 was met with a range of reactions. Many in the community were ecstatic to see Zion Hill finally find a pastor after a long period of inactivity. They were also excited about bringing in a young pastor and first lady; my installation at age 34 made me the second youngest pastor in Newnan. One of the members remarked at our installation in excitement, “This means we finally get some babies!” Although we were “outsiders,” we were not wholly unrelated to the church and the community. My wife's grandmother attended Central High School with many of the members, and I had classmates from Morehouse and Candler in the area, offering support. However, we encountered significant challenges as well. The appointment to Zion Hill reflected in the membership's minds a “replacement” for the man who was their pastor for the vast majority of their lives. There was a reluctance to embrace another pastor, other than the one who married, buried, or spiritually raised family members. This reluctance was heightened by a need to display loyalty to my predecessor's widow, who remained a congregation member.

Issues of discord in the leadership, financial matters were largely looming. However, the more pressing issue was the church's need to see itself authentically and acknowledge its need for repair. Akin to the old Victorian structures that line up Pinson Street, Zion Hill had become detached from the surrounding community. The programs

were mostly self-serving, to the degree that the church's relationship with Chalk Level had broken down. It reflected what Crystal Downing references in *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* as "closed structures."[20] The words "change," "growth," or "updating" were considered allergens, as attempts to divert from the activities that marked Johnson's 39-year tenure were met mostly as a threat to who the congregation chose to self-identify as. Downing writes:

> How Christians sometimes respond to new signs in culture: as allergens that must be kept out of the house of belief. Seeking to protect themselves from new ways of thinking-especially about Christianity-they turn their faith into an aluminum-lined fortress, expecting all who enter their presence to dress their thought with language that doesn't disrupt their highly controlled beliefs. However, if you were to ask them how elements from the outside world might debilitate their faith, many could only offer their extreme irritability at encountering new signs.[21]

I was intentional about approaching this pastoral experience differently than my last two contexts. For one, I was intimately aware of a number of my "wounds." I was working through the process of managing my prior experiences and how they affected me. In partnership with my wife, I began the healing process, knowing that my wounds were not fully healed while walking into the door. As such, I had to be intentional about practicing personal care to give myself space to redress these wounds. This would prevent me from bleeding my issues over an already wounded congregation that did not cause them. I ensured my contract stated scheduled off days and set aside intentional dates to spend in solitude and recovery. Secondly, I began to consider different biblical and church

---

[20] Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 167-175.

[21] Downing, *Changing Signs*, 168.

leadership models I've been exposed to over time, finding myself drawn to the book of Nehemiah due to some strong similarities with my experience.

Akin to Newnan, the setting of the book of Nehemiah finds Judah in a state of disrepair. I was drawn to Nehemiah due to his status as an "outsider" and his deliberate rebuilding process. I began the process by meeting with the current ministry leaders to hear their assessment of the church. In those meetings, I was informed of pre-existing conflicts that had not been addressed in my predecessor's tenure. At our church conference in August, I talked about a plan that emphasized building relationships and the surrounding community. This plan carried a 5-year timeline to modernize our practice and resources. The response was predictably muted; multiple members expressed discomfort with the strategic plan and what it would require of them. In their minds, as one would note in the meeting, the church was doing just fine, and things needed to stay "as is." For a moment, I felt a strong wave of disappointment wash over me; the soundtrack that played as I struggled with Mount Moriah and Cornerstone reared its head. Fortunately, my wife identified my feelings and gave me a knowing glance; the soundtrack stopped playing, and in its place arrived a new one:

I will trust in the Lord, I will trust in the Lord. I will trust in the Lord, 'till I die.[22]

I regained my composure, took a breath, and began to offer concrete facts concerning the church's present state. I mentioned the conflicts that the leadership brought up; I pointed

---

[22] Jeffrey Radford and Nolan B. Williams. "I Will Trust in the Lord." In *African American Heritage Hymnal,* ed. Deloris Carpenter (Chicago: Gia Publications, September 28, 2001), 391.

out the parts of the building that church leaders had expressed were in dire need of repair. I painted the very visible image of the immediate community in a state of disrepair. I used the very observations made by the members concerning the community to validate my statements. I indicated that the strategic plan for Zion Hill was for the church to become authentic to the model and mandate established in the Great Commission[23]. Then, I challenged them to provide concrete examples of how we were presently living into this mandate. The room was silent. Some attempted to shift the conversation, but I refused to yield, believing in a statement that Doctor Simpson shared with me in years past: "One must see things rightly to set things rightly." My soundtrack continued to play as I stood:

> *I'm gonna stay on the battlefield, I'm gonna stay on the battlefield.*
> *I'm gonna stay on the battlefield, 'till I die."*[24]

I explained that the church was not the brick and mortar that comprised the building; the church is, as Matthew's Gospel records, the two or three gathered in the name of Jesus Christ.[25] I then closed the meeting by expressing that I loved them. Everything I was sent to do was continuing the church's legacy to the community and respecting the legacy my predecessor left behind.

> *I'm gonna treat everybody right, I'm gonna treat everybody right.*
> *I'm gonna treat everybody right, 'till I die.*[26]

---

[23] Matt. 28:16-20 NRSV

[24] Radford and Williams. "I Will Trust in the Lord," 391.

[25] Matt. 18:20 NRSV

[26] Radford and Williams. "I Will Trust in the Lord," 391.

Following the meeting, my wife and I debriefed as we do for every service we worship. We both acknowledged that the work required to get the church to view itself authentically would be an arduous task. We identified the resistance that existed to see beyond the image created and lived in concerning the church and the need for the said image to be deconstructed. In truth, the image of the church they lived in was both mythic and inherently self-serving. Edward Wimberly notes in *Recalling Our Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers*:

> Myths function to interpret reality and events that take place through life. In the early process of myth formulation, our experiences in the family of origin and with significant others are very influential – so influential that the myths evolved from them seem unalterably resistant to change. They seem to be part of an indelible, genetic blueprint, nonmalleable by any environment influences.[27]

Zion Hill's experience as a prominent church during the 70s through the early 2000s informed the image they carried about themselves. However, as the surrounding context and even the congregation's makeup had changed, that image remained rigid, unwavering, and uncompromising. As a result, what they imagined as truth was now a myth that could not possibly hold up to reality.

I affirm that much of the pushback I experienced during my tenure was found in the unwillingness to re-sign or "re-author" their truths. For Zion Hill, the challenge of re-signing the truth was that it would give the impression that the work that influential persons of their past performed would appear wrong. In *I Am a Follower: The Way Truth*

---

[27] Edward P. Wimberly, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) 75.

and Life of Following Jesus, Doctor Leonard Sweet uses the illustration of a man visiting a psychiatrist to drive home the issue with self-perception. In this illustration, a man goes to the psychiatrist and expresses issues with his humanity and ability. He indicates he has become a machine that dispenses different soda flavors, but it does not work like a machine. Sweet states, "Two primary problems of the church are the same reasons the man visited the doctor. He was deluded about what he was and what he was made for. And so, too often, are we*."*[28] Zion Hill had an image of itself that was incongruent to whom Christ called the church to be. As such, the church could not function as it was purposed to be, a stronghold in the community and an extension of the hand of Christ until it rehabilitated its inner workings and image. What worked in the past was primarily because of the response of the church to its immediate context. It reflects neatly the Old Victorian homes referenced earlier; the houses have the potential to be restored to beautiful structures suitable for residency, but until rehabilitation work is performed to make them feasible for occupancy, they stand as mere reflections of a distant past.

We commenced working. For the first time, Nehemiah's imagery as a pastoral model became not only real but relatable. In a way, we began intentionally deconstructing the church as a closed structure into an open and welcoming organism. Our approach had to be thought out and carefully executed. Downing states: "deconstruction isn't something that happens from the zap of a deconstruction gun. Instead, you enter into something fully

[28] Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 106.

and, in doing that, you take it beyond its own limits or expose it to its own limitations."[29] We put on paper all the things the church wanted to do and on another sheet of paper all the things the church presently was doing. My preaching, teaching, and installation of new programs were all geared towards intentionally creating open space.

The response was gradual; the membership began to grow again. As the membership, and to some degree, the prominence of the church began to grow, the issues as mentioned earlier began to rear their head again. In a way, the more the church worked towards "rebuilding," the more it appeared to regress. As my frustration began to mount, I questioned whether I was suitable for the task of pastoring this congregation; I ultimately realized that what I perceived as "regression" was in actuality "revealing" how the church chooses to self-identify. Zion Hill was what Crystal Downing identifies as a "closed structure"; that is, an entity that resists any attempts to change, due to its belief that it is perfect "as-is." Downing posits, "Of course, many people are so certain that their house of belief, and only their house, is correct that they refuse to 'take it beyond its own limits.' This necessitates people on the outside exposing the structural flaws in the house."[30] While I affirm Downing's assertion of the church as a "closed structure," the divergence that existed in how the church and I chose to view its role and responsibility within the community was so great that pushing back against it was fruitless at best.

---

[29] Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 174.

[30]Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth*, 174.

Furthermore, while an “outsider” would offer an unbiased vantage point of the structure itself, the church's reluctance to embrace an outsider indicated that any change or critique would have to come from someone who was well acquainted with the church. Akin to prior scenarios, I faced a “fight or flight” dynamic and chose in this instance to stand put and focus on serving God and loving the people. However, in 2018, the Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church, located in Greenville, NC, opened up its Pastoral Search process.

I was somewhat acquainted with Sycamore Hill; I had established relationships with many members, fostered in part by the opportunities to preach and teach Vacation Bible School by their late Pastor, Reverend Howard W. Parker. Not unlike Zion Hill, Sycamore Hill had a longstanding relationship with the Greenville community; it is, at 161 years, the oldest African American congregation in Pitt County. Conversely, Sycamore Hill was a church in transition; Reverend Parker retired due to health issues in July 2017, eventually transitioning in August of the same year. It had been over six years since I had any type of connection to the church. Upon receiving news of the pastoral position opening, and encouragement to apply from individuals in the Greenville community, I had no interest. For one, I was committed to the work of ministry at Zion Hill. I did not wish to perpetuate a narrative of being a “flight risk,” although in my mind, I knew, per the divergence in how the church and I imagined its identity, a long-term partnership would not be fruitful.

Furthermore, while I had enjoyed my last time in Greenville, I was reluctant to leave Atlanta again, as most of my family and community were there. Yet, Sycamore Hill became a curious consideration; my wife relocated to Durham in 2018 per a fellowship opportunity, and I regarded the congregation fondly. Also, for the first time in my ministerial journey, I felt a compulsion, or pull to this location that was unlike anything I've felt before. For the previous stops, I identified each as a choice I made vocation-wise. However, in this instance, I experienced a yearning of sorts to participate with this community. After much fasting and prayer, weighing the pros and cons of a potential relocation, I submitted my application, which, following an intensive vetting and interviewing process, resulted in my call to return to Greenville to pastor Sycamore Hill.

I arrived in Greenville in October 2019 with a far greater feeling of excitement and optimism than in my previous stops. I also came with an understanding that my sense of leadership style and pastoral identity required a tremendous re- signing to account for the shift in how I have been viewing my sense of personal and pastoral identity. Whether subconsciously or consciously, I felt confined to the models I've been exposed to in years past. This also extended to how I viewed pastoring as a vocation. My understanding of the role of "pastor" was rooted in the metaphor of "mantle"; it was a position of leadership that one "puts on" that distinguishes the individual wearing it from those they are responsible for leading. This metaphor extended from my father's image to that of my other pastoral models, carrying the pressure of leaning into a position that frequently eschews authentic approaches to the community in favor of conformity. The danger of this mantle, and adopting it as a metaphor, I've learned is that it can create an artificial pastoral identity

based upon independence from the church body instead of interdependence with the church body. Leonard Sweet notes "We don't need more larger-than-life leaders who conscript others to follow their vision. We need more down-to-earth followers who invite others into a life that opens into one day becoming not leaders in their own right but unflappable, outflankable followers of Jesus."[31]Furthermore, the imagery of the mantle as "task-oriented" can cause the participant to lose appreciation for the role as an "art" that encourages and fosters authenticity, creativity, and joy in action. Hence, I believed that approaching the pastorate as a joyous invitation for collaboration would be beneficial.

Consider this: In 1762, hymnist Charles Wesley penned a hymn entitled "A Charge to Keep I Have." Initially set to Boylston tune, the hymn became widely popular in the Black church while adopting a "call and response" technique. The song leader would line out or speak a verse in tune, followed by the congregation repeating the same. Aside from the difference in melody and tune, the call and response form of "A Charge to Keep I Have" offers the congregation the opportunity to acknowledge their "calling" in communication and community with the Creator and each other. I affirm that the song leader's "calling" and the congregation "responding" in worship is an apt metaphor for the relationship between pastor and people. James Abbington notes: "An old preacher once said, 'Every Sunday I try to find new ways to tell the old story.' As a choir, we must too find new ways

[31] Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 175.

to tell the old story in song so that it is palatable to the congregation."[32] As the pastor offers leadership and guidance to the congregation, the church becomes best equipped to "sing their song" effectively. Both entities have a role to play; however, absent of each other, the song sounds and feels "incomplete." However, it is essential to note that, whereas some would identify the differentiation in roles as a means of separation, the pastor as "song leader" is best imagined as "a part of" the church community, as opposed to "apart from" said community.

I began this partnership with Sycamore Hill on October 5th and deliberately attempted to put Nehemiah's model into practice. I made it a point of emphasis to explore the church's historical archives and sit in several ministry meetings to learn its status. I also provided the opportunity for members to schedule a one-on-one appointment with me to begin building relationships. My prior experiences informed my approach; I decided to take a deliberate pace, focusing on something Doctor Simpson emphasized to me years prior, "loving God and serving the people," all the while avoiding making any immediate, wholesale changes. The deliberate pace was challenging initially, as the excitement over the partnership's potential was placed in communication with the congregation's comfort level. Still, as we focused on building relationships with each other, the church began experiencing significant growth.

---

[32] James Abbington, *Let Mt. Zion Rejoice! Music in the African American Church* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 41.

I was at the church daily, even on my days off. I found a considerable amount of joy and peace being present at Sycamore Hill that had proven elusive at my previous stops. However, this temporal peace was disrupted in March, as the onset of a global pandemic[33] forced entire local governments to enact sweeping travel and gathering restrictions, including churches. For the first time since 1968[34], the church was physically unable to gather. Also, it did not have the technological infrastructure or strategic plan to transition into a virtual, streaming format, which forced the church to grapple with the complete discontinuation of church-related activities or an immediate adaptation to the technological norms of many social organizations. Fortunately, I had an extensive personal background in social media and technology. I immediately went to work drawing out and communicating to the leadership the items we would need to maintain some activity continuance. I recorded a series of sermons in the sanctuary before the shutdown of Greenville. I began streaming an abbreviated form of our worship services that Sunday, ensuring that the church would not experience any interruptions in worship. Furthermore, in conversation with the church's leadership, we moved our Christian education activities

[33] COVID-19 Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.

[34] In 1968, Sycamore Hill's edifice was the last building standing in downtown Greenville due to "urban renewal." A suspicious arson gutted the building, displacing the congregation and forcing sale of the property to the city.

to the streaming format, permitting (with a gradual learning curve) our members the opportunity to stay connected.

However, whereas having the know-how and the equipment to provide these services was beneficial to our community during the pandemic, it created an adverse effect personally. For one, due to the shortage of technology equipment and usage, I had to rely on my equipment and dedicate considerable time towards recording, editing, rendering, and posting each service, on top of my responsibilities to preach, teach bible study, and provide counseling. Secondly, I was not unaffected personally by the potential consequences of COVID-19; in May, my father-in-law succumbed to the virus. His death placed additional pressure to support my wife, who, per her fellowship, resided in Durham. In hindsight, there were aspects of the pastoral responsibilities that I could have delegated from the onset. However, in the moment of adapting quickly to the fluidity of the pandemic and the country's response to it, I reverted to the outdated imagery of a pastor who was tasked to be the “savior” of a church. I struggled to bear the notion of this weight that I was not designated nor equipped to handle. Over time, I identified this imagery's pull and how it adversely impacted my health, relationships, and general well-being and took corrective behavior steps to resolve it.

Today, one year into this pandemic and almost a year and a half into this pastorate, I am still wrestling with the fluidity of pastoral identity in light of a fluid, ever-changing world. The pandemic experience has postponed, if not prevented, several symbolic occasions that mark the arrival of a new pastor, such as a ceremonial installation.

Conversely, the inability to physically gather with a membership I have only visibly seen for five months has forced me to contemplate ways to be present in this pastoral role, absent of being physically present. From a physical standpoint, I utilized the technology afforded to us (i.e., social media, zoom) to offer weekly opportunities to connect. By doing so, I believe it provides a reminder that although we are physically apart from each other, we are pushing through this pandemic as a part of each other. However, I also concluded that pastoral presence could not be devoid of prophetic engagement. In *The Black Church in the African American Experience,* authors C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya identify the Black church as an institution that encounters a series of dialectical tensions to project a holistic portrait. Per the authors, the church must exercise both priestly and prophetic functions.[35] Lincoln notes:

> Every Black church is involved with both functions. Priestly functions involve only those activities concerned with the worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members; church maintenance activities are the major thrust. Prophetic functions refer to involvement in the political concerns and activities in the wider community; classically prophetic activity has meant pronouncing a radical word of God's judgment. Some churches are closer to one end than to the other. Priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of liberation. But both types of churches also illustrate both functions, which means that liberation churches also perform the priestly functions and priestly churches contain liberation potential.[36]

The present social scene holds the tension of survival and liberation for African Americans, not as opposites, but as penultimate opportunities leading to the "self-actualization" of

---

[35] Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 12.

[36] Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 11.

society, inclusive of the Black church. If the Black church must hold proper both priestly and prophetic functions, the pastor must mirror a pastor-prophet synthesis[37]. In consideration of the present unrest that exists in our communities brought on by the pandemic, as well as socio-economic, cultural, and racial disparities, I believe the pastor must identify that liberation and survival are intrinsically interrelated; thus, attempts to assume the pastoral "robe" absent of prophetic responsibility would cultivate an inauthentic, insufficient sense of pastoral identity.

[37] Although Lincoln and Mamiya utilize the language of "priest/prophet", for the sake of this discourse I will update the language to reflect "pastor/prophet." In the Jewish model, the priest's primary function was to lead the people in ritual worship; however, any administrative responsibilities were confined to the temple. This is a departure from many pastor roles, where the pastor's emphasis is not limited to worship, but inclusive of building relationships inside and outside the church edifice.

Chapter Two
"I Went Out by Night": Church and Community in Conversation

In downtown Greenville, on a one-acre parcel of land at the corner of First and Greene Streets, there stands a newly erected, 1.9-million-dollar plaza that, at first glance, appears to be out of place. Once the location of a vibrant, expansive Black community, the area was razed in the 1960s under the guise of urban renewal. Aside from the town commons amphitheater and several older businesses built shortly after that, the area remained mostly vacant until the city proposed to "honor" the community once there with the plaza's construction. Per the city:

> The development of a commemorative tower, plaza, and gardens at Town Common will serve as a place for healing and celebratory remembrance, to reflect on the past while creating an acclaimed regional and national attraction at Town Common. This project serves as an opportunity to celebrate Town Common, Greenville's "Central Park," by creating special places and activities that will attract and retain residents and visitors while creating a prominent western gateway into the park. Improvements to Town Common will serve as a foundation upon which to continue the city's growth and make it a more exciting place to live, work, and play.[38]

The plaza is located amongst older, time-worn buildings. It comprises a stone floor, with words embodying the past community's three prevalent themes inscribed on the stone: *History*, *Spirituality*, and *Community*. There are also stone walls, upon which photos with captions explain, albeit vaguely, the history of the displaced community per the words of former residents who were still alive at the time of the planning stage. However, the

[38] "Sycamore Hill Gateway Plaza Project Background," Perkins + Will, Accessed October 15,2020, https://sycamorehillplaza.com/view-timeline/.

central point and perhaps the most visible, distinctive aspect of the plaza is a large, illuminated, stained glass tower that bears the church's name that stood as the community's epicenter in that exact location: Sycamore Hill Gateway Plaza. This plaza, located in stark contrast to the time-displaced buildings, is an appropriate entry point in discussing my context's identity, the Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church.

Akin to the plaza that bears its name, the Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church is positioned spiritually as a place for hope, healing, and celebration, all the while seeking to bridge the gap between its illustrious past and inspired future. Founded in 1860, Sycamore Hill is the oldest black church in Pitt County, NC, and the most prominent. According to historian Sam Barber, since the origin of Greenville in 1771, the church was the only recognized historical landmark for African Americans in the city.[39] Within the downtown "Shore Drive" area, Sycamore Hill's membership constituted the "Black Elite" of Greenville; doctors, lawyers, bankers, and others whose businesses were located in the area all claimed membership of the church. The long-term church and community members could recall that the church's prominence was due to location and the magnificent edifice and the sounds of worship that would emerge from it each Sunday morning, strategically introduced by a bell ringing in the bell tower.

The prominence of Sycamore Hill was not merely local. On October 15, 1960, a motorcade carrying Democratic Presidential candidate John Fitzgerald Kennedy crossed

---

[39] Sam Barber, *A Journey to Purchasing and Naming the Brown Hill Cemetery* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2015), 163.

over the Tar River and intentionally passed the church to acknowledge its standing to the community. However, this local and national prominence did not shield the church from racial overtones of the era. The city deemed the Shore Drive area to be valuable property due to its direct path to the Business District of the city; however, it was also the location of Greenville's bustling African American community. The city desired to redevelop the area to push the Black citizens residing there out of potential business partners' visible eye. Barber notes:

> Another story from the 1960s illustrates a lack of local government transparency and cultural violence against Greenville's Negro citizens. As the story unfolds, some citizens of the community and City Council members were persuaded that a slum area next to the Central Business District where Negroes lived, worked, died and buried their dead needed to be redeveloped. Under the name of the Shore Drive Rehabilitation Project, former residents ultimately concluded that the project was really a surreptitious way to move colored citizens away from the Downtown area, which was only less than a half-mile from the Central Business District.[40]

As the city began to purchase, raze, and in some instances declare eminent domain on properties in the area, Sycamore Hill remained unyielding and unwilling to relocate, as it found value in remaining planted in the very community it was founded within. It is important to note that initially, Greenville, at the onset of the Rehabilitation Project, entered into a "NOT TO BE ACQUIRED" (NTBA) agreement with the church, stating the church's desire to retain the property and the Redevelopment Commission's acknowledgment of such.[41] However, per members of the church who were active at the time, the city essentially ignored the agreement, continuing to pressure the congregation

---

[40] Barber, *A Journey to Purchasing*, 170.

[41] Barber, 182-184

to rescind it until June of 1968, when the church purchased a site on Eighth Street with the intent to relocate. According to the Preliminary Inventory of the Greenville Urban Renewal files, Sycamore Hill agreed to sell the church property at a price point of $100,548.00.[42] The city cited a difference in appraisal value, suggesting the price point to be $76,304.

Although the church had prepared for eventual location, two events occurred that made the transition a tragic, traumatic event. The first event was constructing a concrete wall along Greene Street, which was stated to protect the property from erosion; however, it also blocked access to the building and the cemetery attached to it. The second event occurred on February 13, 1969, recorded by the Daily Reflector:

> The old Sycamore Hill Baptist Church building at the intersection of First and Greene Streets was gutted by fire early today. The fire was reported at 12:04 A.M…The building burned today was constructed in 1917. It replaced a wood-frame church building that also burned."[43]

An investigation of the fire yielded suspicion of arson. At the same time, many Greenville residents placed the blame on students participating in civil rights demonstrations. The fire's timing in proximity to the negotiations to sell the building caused many within the Black community to blame the city. The building's damage adversely impacted the church building's property value, ultimately resulting in the final

---

[42] "Sycamore Hills Baptist Church Memorandum. Offer of Land Sale, Project No. N.C.R. -15, Parcel No. 6-4. Greenville, NC, August 17, 1968*," Preliminary Inventory of the Greenville Urban Renewal Files, 1959-1977*), Housing Authority of the City of Greenville.

[43] Stuart Savage, "Arson Suspected in Costly Loss: Old Sycamore Hill Church Burns." *The Daily Reflector*, February 13, 1969, 1.

cost of sale to be $50,000, along with the city's assuming responsibility for reinterring the graves on the church's lot to Brown Hill Cemetery. However, it is more important to note that the damage to the building, and subsequent sale, also adversely impacted the congregation, creating an experience of trauma that still reverberates today. Although the church was well established in its Eighth St. building at the time of the arson, the original building stood as a metaphor for the now displaced community's values: History, Spirituality, and Community. In the eyes of the membership, it was more than brick and mortar; it was a place where everyone could experience a sense of "somebody-ness" or self-importance. The concept of "somebody-ness" is not a random phenomenon related to the Black Church.

In *Crisis in the Village*, Dr. Robert Franklin identifies several things "everyone" should know concerning Black churches. Some items included in this list are:

- The Black church has been and continues to function as the hub of civil society and remains the center of social life in many black communities.
- Black churches have been therapeutic institutions fostering a culture of psychological freedom, mental health, and self-esteem.
- Black churches have functioned as extended family networks.
- The historical influence of black churches appears to be in decline.[44]

Nevertheless, in the face of tension and relocation, Sycamore Hill continued to grow.

In conversation with the oral stories shared by long-tenured members, a review of the church's written history yields some interesting information concerning Sycamore

[44] Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 110-111.

Hill's personality throughout its growth. First, Sycamore Hill is "family-oriented." As it tends to be the case with many churches in rural communities, the membership shares familiarity by growing up in the same neighborhood or bloodlines. As such, the families who have been present in the church's earliest days wielded considerable influence over how the church was run, how services would be performed, and general everyday decision making. This dynamic began to create an underlying schism in the membership that continues to exist, albeit not as prominently, to this day. Those who are not part of those families, whether biologically or by marriage, were considered "outsiders," even though they successfully met any requirements "on paper" for church membership. Israel Galindo notes in *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* that

> The inclusion dynamics of this congregation make it essentially a 'closed' system. This is a "members-only" congregation with a strong sense of who "we" are and who "they" are-or perhaps more precisely, who 'is not one of us.' Entry and participation in this system is difficult to achieve-unless you are literally 'one of the family.'[45]

The closed system began to create a detachment of sorts as the community changed and the church eventually relocated to its present location on Hooker Road. This closed system also yielded itself in terms of the church's image. As stated previously, the church's membership was mostly inclusive of what was considered the "Black elite" of Greenville, as doctors, lawyers, and other blue-collar professionals intermingled with white-collar members who worked the farms or functioned as domestics. Thus, there was an "air" concerning Sycamore Hill, albeit a somewhat inaccurate one, that the church was self-serving and unwelcoming. The worship style, inclusive of anthems, a weekly

---

[45] Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2004), 80.

affirmation of faith, and a prominent pipe organ clashed with the emerging gospel sound that had begun to reach across the country in the 1960s, causing, unfairly, a perception that pushed people away, as opposed to beckoning them in. However, what appeared to be a closed system external to the church reflected something decidedly different within the church's proverbial walls. Coinciding with the pastoral ministry of the late Reverend Howard Parker, Jr., who assumed the pastoral mantle in 1981, Sycamore Hill was actively engaged in various activities. Per the church history:

> We have realized some firsts since *"the Hill"* moved to Hooker Road. Soon after the move, the Women's Ministries was organized and has since held numerous programs to edify this church body. Under the direction of Dr. Vina A. Hassell, in 1998, Senior Home Care Services, Inc. began providing personal care services: In-Home Aides, Personal Care, and Respite Care. On April 14, 1999, under the direction of Pastor Howard W. Parker, Jr. and Dr. Vina A. Hassell, and under the leadership of Charter Chairperson Sister Sarah G. Pritchard and Charter Vice-Chairperson Deacon Samuel Hairston, respectively, the first known Senior Christian Fellowship Ministry in an African American church in Greenville was launched at Sycamore Hill. Twenty-eight individuals attended the gathering. The ministry continues to flourish. Since then, numerous churches in the area have followed suit with a senior ministry.[46]

The church also launched (and continues) outreach activities such as preparing meals for the homeless shelter, collecting 400+ bookbags yearly for distribution to students in Greenville, and distributing food boxes during the Christmas season. So, contrary to the community's perception, Sycamore Hill was (and continues to be) an active church. However, the church's perception cannot be summarily dismissed because, as the previous citation from the history displays, the "going on's" were primarily inward-facing. In a sense, this gave the church a false sense of permission to proceed as

---

[46] Beatrice C. Maye, *Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church History* (Greenville: Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church, 2005.

"business as usual," as it viewed (and to a degree, still does view) itself as a community within the community. Perhaps, I suppose, this dynamic is a manifestation of the unresolved trauma of loss and displacement from its original site. By emphasizing "self-care," the church lost its ability to be a prophetic voice within the community. It was present location-ally, but not relationally. This dynamic's challenge is that the church reflects less of an authentic church and more of a social club. Dr. Leonard Sweet articulates this point in "The Missional Life, Pt. 1" chapter of *So Beautiful*: "The church can never be "on a mission" because that presupposes an "off switch, and you can't be "off mission" and still be a church. The church is mission."[47]

I believe that Sweet's statement, in conversation with Sycamore Hill's inward focus at the time, offers a direct implication of how hubris can affect and infect historic congregations. For years, Sycamore Hill existed as a status church in Greenville. To say that one was a member of Sycamore Hill was to suggest that he or she had some degree of "somebody-ness" or social standing. However, this perception of "somebody-ness" was not rooted in understanding God affirming creation with the words "It is good."[48] Instead, it was rooted in affiliation with a premier social organization that professed it to

[47] Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 64.

[48] Gen 1:31 NRSV

be the church in belief, but not in practice. As a result, upon the turn of the 2000s, the church had become, as Ron Dempsey suggests, "one choice among many."[49]

In 2017, Sycamore Hill experienced another transitional period in the retirement of its longest-tenured pastor, Reverend Howard Parker, Jr. In a tenure expanding over 35 years, Reverend Parker modeled the imagery of what Sycamore Hill aspired to be. In addition to establishing the vision of relocating the church to its present edifice and establishing multiple ministries, he served with distinction numerous international, state, and local organizations. Towards the end of his tenure, Reverend Parker was beset with extended bouts of illness that often forced his absence from the church. Reluctantly, Reverend Parker tendered his retirement on Sunday, July 23, 2017. A little more than a month later, he passed away on August 31, with the church receiving word as the interim pastor, Doctor Kenneth Hammond, was signing his contract. Doctor Kenneth R. Hammond became Interim Pastor on September 1, 2017, and promptly led the congregation to select a Pastoral Search Committee commissioned on Sunday, November 26, 2017, during the morning worship service. Almost two years later, on October 6, 2019, I began my tenure as the 15th Pastor in the church's history. The Sycamore Hill I inherited was similar in some respects to the undeveloped lot it once stood on before the construction of the Gateway Plaza. The membership, which at the time of moving into the Hooker Road edifice in 1998 exceeded 500 persons, had dwindled to 286, with less

[49] Ron Dempsey, *Faith Outside the Walls: Why People Don't Come and Why the Church Must Listen* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997), 22.

than half of that number physically active in the church. Furthermore, after decades of functioning as a "closed space," the congregation's makeup did not reflect the community's makeup.

There are presently approximately 117,485 persons residing in Greenville, reflecting an increase of 31,261 or 36.3% since 2000. Per projections, within five years, the expectation is that this number will increase to 123,177, reflecting a continued trend of growth in the city. The amount and pace of development are not to be unexpected; Vidant Medical Center's expansion has become a point of emphasis of the city in establishing it as "a great place to live, work, play, and visit."[50] As the city focused on developing its medical campus, including the James and Connie Maynard Children's Hospital, Vidant Medical Center, and a slew of specialty clinics, new opportunities for practitioners and technology providers to establish market share stimulated growth.

The medical field has been paired with East Carolina University as the focus of emphasis for the city. Located within 5 minutes of Sycamore Hill, ECU has been declared by the Princeton Review as one of 2020's Best 385 colleges. A Division 1A school, ECU has achieved prominence athletically and academically, with many of its graduate programs ranked nationally by U.S. News & World Report.[51] It is safe to

---

[50] Granicus, "City of Greenville," accessed October 12,2020, https://www.greenvillenc.gov/i-want-to/our-city.

[51] East Carolina University, "Ranking & Recognitions," accessed October 12, 2020, https://ipar.ecu.edu/dashboards/dshbd-ranking-recognition/.

assume that the growth of ECU and Vidant share points of connectivity; the Brody School of Medicine ranks in the top 10% of U.S. Medical Schools for graduating physicians who

- Practice in the state
- Practice primary care
- Practice in rural and underserved areas.[52]

These entities prompted a generational shift in Greenville as the population began to shift to reflect younger college and adult-aged persons. The generation known as the Millennials (1982-2001) is the largest, experiencing incremental growth over the last decade. The second-largest generation is Generation Z (Born 2002-later) at 23.1%. However, their population share percentage has exploded since 2010 from 10.6%, leapfrogging the Survivors generation, which had in 2020 a percentage of 21.7%, marking a 3.4% drop since 2010.

A combination of factors, I believe, plays into this. For one, the influx of graduates from the ECU campus offers a readily available pipeline to replace teachers, skilled laborers, and other workers who have either aged out of their positions or retired. Secondly, the shift to a medical and education-driven economy[53], coupled with the cost of living in Greenville as 10% lower than the national average, makes it an attractive

[52] East Carolina University, "Brody School of Medicine," accessed October 12, 2020, https://medicine.ecu.edu/about/.

[53] Due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic, Greenville (and to a degree, the country as a whole) has experienced an adverse effect for both sectors. Educators are resigning, likely due to a combination of fear concerning contracting COVID-19 due to in-person learning and the lack of a concrete, tested plan from the school board and local government to protect educators and students.

place for young adults to establish roots.[54] Also of note is the matter of faith activity. According to Greenville's gathered demographics, courtesy of the Percept Group, 41.5% of the population identifies being "strongly involved with their faith," which is markedly higher than the national average of 35.4%. The estimated 2020 households show the largest percentage of faith identifiers as Baptist (30.9%); these figures, as mentioned above, suggest that Baptist churches, in general, should experience membership growth, particularly amongst college-aged – and career starting ages.

However, this trend was not reflected in the membership of Sycamore Hill. At the time of my arrival, the membership of the church totaled approx. Two hundred eighty-six persons;[55] of that number, twenty-three persons (inclusive of my wife and I) or 8% were of college or career starting age. Of the twenty-three persons, seven were active in the church's life; the others retained their membership as they relocated for school or employment opportunities. Another factor of consideration is the tenure of the membership. 78% of the members had joined over twenty years ago; less than forty persons became members within ten years (2010 -2020). There was a lack of growth present in a community and city trending in the opposite direction. In discussion with members of the church leadership, the following have been identified as contributors:

- The church did not participate in community activities or partner with other churches in a relationship

[54] Percept Group, “Ministry Area Profile: Greenville NC,” accessed November 30, 2020, http://www.ministryarea.com/Reports/ReportViewer.aspx?id=ea8381ac-86e8-4420-bccd-338a1a4b75b3, 4.

[55] Data gathered from SHMBC Membership Roster, updated 10.01.19

- The pastor was ill frequently, and in his absence, unable to push forth a vision for growth
- The church was unwilling to adjust its worship style to make it more palatable for the younger generations
- The congregation was primarily aged and restricted physically or health-wise from extensive participation

Each of those mentioned above were inward-facing issues; that is, matters within the church body that impacted its willingness and ability to perform external ministry.

The greatest challenge in preparing for ministry beyond our walls is re-establishing the church's presence both in and with the community. Doing so requires an honest, in-depth look at how the church lives into its presumed identity within Greenville. Much of the language concerning Sycamore Hill speaks not of its present location or activities; instead, it continues to point and emphasize its presence as a community church on the corner of First and Greene Street. One of the members confided that the church has not been present relationally, which has compromised its ability to witness on the community's behalf. The immediate community and those who pass by have misidentified the building as a white church, a vacant school, and, ironically, a funeral home. This confusion over identity becomes even more startling considering a large sign encased in brick announcing the church's name and a large, silver cross adorning the lawn in front of the narthex entrance that leads directly to the sanctuary. I presume that to the community Sycamore Hill was detached and not authentically the church incarnate. It brings to mind a quote from English philosopher G.K. Chesterton, found nestled in

Doctor Leonard Sweet's work *FaithQuakes*: "For anything to be real it must be local."[56] My interpretation of this quote looks at the word "local" as a matter of physical proximity and personal relatability. That relatability manifests itself in two ways: in "currency" and in "*current-cy.*" Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines the former as "something that is in circulation as a medium of exchange."[57] Traditionally, we identify currency like coins, treasury notes, and other tenders that can be used to purchase goods and services. However, I believe it is also applicable to ideas, practices, and even events that produce and retain value between the two exchanging parties. In this instance, currency resembles the church and community, identifying a common goal and purpose and the willingness to partner together to achieve said purpose. We witness this in the form of rallies, community forums, and particularly in locations like Greenville, faith-based practices. "Current-cy," or "currentness," means to occur in or exist at present. In layman's terms, the church cannot be so rigidly stuck in the past, in that it cannot meet up (or in some cases catch up) with the community in the present. Particularly in the face of a global pandemic and racial unrest, the church has a responsibility to acknowledge how the community is impacted at present and potential future implications for it. Crystal Downing refers to this phenomenon as the following: "When people idealize the past, they "mystify" it: a word many scholars use to denote the smokescreen that covers over

---

[56] Leonard Sweet, *FaithQuakes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 180.

[57] *Merriam-Webster Online,* s.v. “currency,” accessed May 1, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/currency.

actual problems."[58] Focusing on the past, which is remembered continuously differently than how it existed, creates an excuse for avoiding change. Change appears to be a "dirty word" in many traditional African American churches, for it suggests, in my opinion, that the practices of the past were wrong or insufficient. Change also appears to be a "dirty word" for what it reveals, which could very well be an inaccurate representation of the community we desire to serve or what the service should resemble.

Consider *Sister Act*. The film's premise centers on Whoopi Goldberg's character Deloris, a lounge singer who witnesses a murder and joins a convent under Witness Protection. Under the guide of Sister Mary Clarence, Deloris brings life into the convent, particularly the choir. Due to her influence, the choir is invited to perform in concert before the Pope, to which the following exchange occurs between the traditionally minded Reverend Mother and progressive Mary Clarence:

> **Reverend Mother**: Oh sisters, this is indeed glorious news! We are both humbled and honored, and on such a supremely solemn occasion, I do feel that a traditional program will be best.
> **Mary Clarence**: And traditional like the old way?
> **Reverend Mother**: You're speaking of his holiness, Sister Mary Clarence, not a neighborhood block party. The pontiff commands the utmost humility and respect. Your more secular entertainment would be totally out of place.
> **Nuns**: But Reverend Mother, everyone loves our new style; it has brought people back to the church.
> **Mary Clarence**: That's why he's coming, I mean, because we are doing something new and different.[59]

---

[58]Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 39.

[59] *Sister Act*, directed by Emile Ardolino (1992; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Pictures, 2002), DVD.

In this scene, the Reverend Mother commits a series of dangerous cultural faux pas. She considers the concert in itself to be a "solemn" occasion, with solemnness inferred to be serious and formal. She elevates the Pope as "above" the neighborhood and devalues the imagery of a neighborhood block party. Then, she rejects the change that attracted the Pope to the choir in favor of what she presumed the convent should look like

Ironically, churches commit the same cultural faux pas as well, explicitly in Sycamore Hill's case. First, while there is a time and place for serious and formal worship, per the Precept Group's findings, most church attendees prefer a service that offers a contemporary feel (27.8%), followed by those who crave a balance of traditional and contemporary (25.6%), followed by no preference (21.4%). [60] One of the detachment points raised historically concerning the church was its propensity for "high church," or solemn, dignified worship that created an air of arrogance.

The second faux pas is related to the assumption that the block party is not worthy of the Pope, much less the church's presence. The image of a neighborhood block party, I believe, would be an apt re-signing of the church partnering with the community. Block parties originate as events of pride and coming together for the community. They provide live music, food, seminars, and other activities for all ages, attention-grabbing signage,

[60]Percept Group, "Ministry Area Profile: Greenville NC," accessed November 30, 2020, http://www.ministryarea.com/Reports/ReportViewer.aspx?id=ea8381ac-86e8-4420-bccd-338a1a4b75b3.

and opportunities to interact or fellowship with others occupying the same space. The block party embodies in large part what churches should represent as a gathering of believers.

The third faux pas is the assumption that things should remain "as-is;" change is not a gimmick to attract persons into a church community and then abolished to return to what is convenient for the membership. Change is a commitment to creating a safe space for others to experience Christ's salvific work within the framework of freedom. The church as a community, or what both Yuval Noah Harari and Sweet would identify as "tribe," must rethink how it defines and lives into its sense of community. Harari offers this portrait:

> Humans easily develop loyalty to small intimate groups such as a tribe, an infantry company, or a family business, but it is hardly natural for humans to be loyal to millions of utter strangers. Such mass loyalties have appeared only in the last few thousand years-yesterday morning, in evolutionary terms, and they require immense efforts of social construction.[61]

Harari indicates the ease of forming small intimate groups with shared loyalties instead of establishing larger bonds with the overarching society. This gives credence to the small communities that are included within the larger community of the church. However, Harari then offers an illustration of

> The ancient tribes that lived along the Nile River thousands of years ago. The river was their lifeblood. It watered their fields and carried their commerce. But it was an unpredictable ally. Too little rain and people starved to death; too much rain and the river overflowed its banks and destroyed entire villages. No tribe could solve this problem by itself, because each tribe commanded only a small

---

[61] Yuval N. Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York City: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 110-111.

> section of the river and could mobilize no more than a few hundred laborers. Only a common effort to build huge dams and dig hundreds of miles of canals could hope to restrain and harness the mighty river.[62]

The church as a community is but one tribe that must work in a collaborative relationship with the surrounding unchurched community to restrain and harness the city's obligation to meet their collective needs. Thus, the concept of "tribes" must be re-signed and re-established in light of the need for this collaborative relationship. Let's consider the commissioning of the disciples by Christ and the commissioning of humanity by God to be caretakers for humanity[63]. Tribes are best imagined as "dispatch teams" to different communities to provide care for said community. Each tribe has a segment or sector of assignment but should never presume that it can function absent of the other tribes. As the system established by God is both cooperative and collaborative, Sycamore Hill needs to be in a relationship with Greenville and vice versa.

For Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church to create and cultivate this collaborative relationship with the Greenville community going forward, both parties must be aware of the needs of the community. It would be reckless for the church to create programs "for" or "in the name of" the community if it is not in tune with its makeup and needs. According to Ronald Johnson, "a serious engagement with people outside the church based on respect for them and care for them as human beings" must

---

[62] Harari, *21 Lessons*, 110-111.

[63] Gen1:26-28 NRSV.

occur.[64] Along those lines, engaging those outside the church community presents Sycamore Hill with the opportunity to re-sign itself as an actual "gateway," an open, welcoming community, and an access point for transformation. In doing so, the opportunity also exists for Sycamore Hill to reconcile its past trauma to reposition itself as the community church.

[64] Ronald W. Johnson, *From the Outside in: Connecting to the Community around You* (Saint Louis: Lake Hickory Resources, 2006), 150.

Chapter Three

"Come, Let Us Rebuild": An Invitation for Pastor / People Partnership

In March 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reverberated around Greenville. To counter the rising numbers of diagnosed persons, the governor elected to enact a statewide shutdown. The response was notably panic-filled; businesses had to grapple with immediate cancellations and lost revenue, while parents and school systems alike struggled to maintain learning virtually. Churches, including Sycamore Hill, were not exempt. I rushed to record multiple sermons within 48 hours, and that Friday, at 4:00 PM, our church building was closed down for the first time since its construction.

During the next few days, correspondence came in from members who expressed concern about the inability to gather in the building. For many of them, the pandemic's uncertainty, coupled with the resulting shutdown, prompted feelings of loss. I assert that these feelings of loss revealed the unresolved trauma that existed within the congregation, particularly the long-term members, since the relocation to Eighth Street in 1968. The experience of loss reverberates out of time and resurfaces with similar experiences or events that threaten loss. As such, this traumatic experience remains fresh and vivid yet challenging to grasp. Cathy Carruth states that "trauma…does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully

owned."[65] I believe this "force" creates a discombobulated, disruptive narrative that holds the church as "trauma patient" in a space where they struggle to find or make progress.

This is not to suggest that trauma is the guiding force for the church's identity and practices. However, until addressed, I believe the trauma does function as an invisible yet influential force that prevents the church from cultivating wholeness, as it becomes consumed with preserving a fading identity. In *The Hidden Lives of Congregations*, Israel Galindo offers the following:

> The primary mandate of the church is to be a transforming influence in the world. This is how the church becomes relevant in people's lives. The institutional tendency of organizations, however, is to focus primarily on self-preservation and on the comfort and benefit of their own members. And while a congregation is an institutionalized expression of the church, it is wrong, and against its nature, when self-preservation and comfort become the primary reasons for its existence.[66]

At present, Sycamore Hill's relevance resides amongst those who are a part of its history, directly or indirectly. Suppose it reconciles[67] its trauma, its defining metaphor to the Greenville community shifts from a "relic" of a distant past, to a relevant, relational representation of Christ in community, with the community. The work of reconciliation

---

[65] Cathy Carruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 51.

[66] Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 41.

[67] It is important to note that, per Merriam Webster's definition of reconcile as "to restore to friendship or harmony; settle, resolve", we want to avoid the language of dismissing or downplaying how the trauma is intertwined with the church's history (or that of any community or organization). Rather, reconciliation in this instance is coming to terms with the experience, and subsequently using it as part of a life-affirming narrative that liberates, as opposed to enslaves.

would be, as Cathy Carruth posits, categorized as "trauma theory." Dirk Lange states: trauma theory reveals how we can approach meaning and reference in history that moves beyond an empirical and representational prison.[68] This approach cannot be wrought simply by human desire; reconciliation is Divine. We are reminded of the Apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19:

> So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 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.[69]

As we are reconciled by God, through Christ to God, I believe it fosters liberation through transformation. As we are forgiven for our "trespasses," we have permission to relinquish feelings of guilt or despair that may have accompanied said trespasses. According to James Cone, reconciliation is a divine action that embraces the whole world, changing our relationship with God and making us new creatures.[70]

As the church experiences its own "liberation," it becomes empowered to embody what Leonard Sweet refers to as an "M. R. I." church; that is, missional, relational, and incarnational. This church is a church "on the go"; it concerns itself with partnering with

---

[68] Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 6.

[69] 2 Cor 5:17-19 NRSV

[70] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 228.

the community "as it goes" forth to become all that God intended for it to be. Sweet states:

> There is a little incarnational participle in Matthew 28:19 that we improperly translate as a command: "Go!" A more accurate translation would be "While going." Without respecting that incarnational participle, we've taken the commission to mean to and pull people out of their contexts, make them disciples within the protected zones of our churches, and then send them out to spread a unitary Christian culture. Not so. Our starting point is not telling people where they should be but being with people where they already are "while going" and catching up to the Spirit.[71]

The church and the pastor collaborate on the community's journey to write a narrative that considers the stories, history, and rituals of each and synthesizes those entities into a coherent, meaningful, and life-affirming community that liberates, as opposed to enslaves.

Arguably, while this notion of acknowledging trauma in a church narrative is not restricted to any particular ecclesial entity, I would argue that the Black church has a unique relationship with trauma that affords further discussion. Within Black culture, the church and the community are indistinguishable; for persons like those who attended Sycamore Hill at its original site, the community was built as an extension of the church. C. Eric Lincoln asserts

> To understand the power of the Black Church it must first be understood that there is no disjunction between the Black Church and the Black community. The church is the spiritual face of the Black community, and whether one is a "church member" or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black Church. Because of the peculiar nature of the Black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of

---

[71] Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, Co: David C. Cook, 2009), 151-152.

> that experience, the times was when the personal dignity of the Black individual was communicated almost entirely through his church affiliation.[72]

The challenge of this statement is not accuracy; at one point, this assertion did ring true. The Black church functioned as a "one-stop shop" for the community. Here, on any given day, one could find access to local produce, medical practitioners, legal advice, schools, just to name a few. However, Lincoln's statement does not age well, as it does not account for the increasingly waning influence of the Black church as the central point of Black communities. Whereas Lincoln identifies the Black church as the "cultural womb"[73] of the Black community, a series of factors have detached the church and community.

Community to Commuter-Based Makeup

As previously stated, many Black churches served as the epicenters for black communities. During the late 1960s, black families who were no longer feeling confined location-wise to the inner cities began migrating to the suburbs and more affluent locations that were once "off-limits." If church membership were retained, the congregation's makeup would likely shift from solely community-based to, at least in part, commuter-based. In this instance, while the church stood physically in the same community it had occupied over time, the congregation's interests and investment would invariably shift, as that location was no longer solely their local community.

---

[72] C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier (*New York City: Schocken Books, 1974), 115-116.

[73] Lincoln, *The Black Church*, 8.

Sexual Identity

The Black church, and Black culture, have always had a tenuous relationship related to the matters of sexuality and sexual identity. The church has adopted a conservative view concerning sexual identity, citing vaguely interpreted scriptures to justify declaring non-heteronormative relationships as sinful and taboo. In *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective,* Doctor Kelly Brown Douglas offers the following:

> Whether they are churchgoers or not, Black people often argue that the Bible makes clear that homosexuality is a sin. By invoking biblical authority, they place a sacred canopy, a divine sanction, over their views toward gay and lesbian persons. This canopy renders homophobia practically intractable. The Bible becomes, then, a tool for censoring a group of people, in this case, gay men and lesbians.[74]

Brown Douglas further argues that by taking on this position, the Bible then becomes a tool of oppression, not unlike its use to justify slavery in the United States' formative years. The irony of this "canopy" is glaring within the Black church; members of the LGBTQIA+ community have contributed as members and leaders within the Black church for as far back as one can remember. However, they would either have to remain closeted, renounce their sexual identity, or participate in a "don't ask, don't tell" custom to participate. As society is making gradual strides in LGBTQIA+ rights, and persons are embracing a newfound sense of freedom in living their identity absent of the proverbial "closet," the church is challenged to consider whether the image of Christ it espouses is

---

[74] Kelly Brown Douglas *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 1665, Kindle.

consistent with how it welcomes those inside, and outside its congregations. Doctor Raphael G. Warnock, Senior Pastor of the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, suggests a clarion call for internal reflection: "Moreover, internally the black church needs a sophisticated ethic of accountability that calls the church to examine the contemporary implications of its highest theological and moral claims about itself for those who are marginalized within its own family."[75]

Social Justice and Activism

The Black church historically has served a prominent role in addressing the social ills of society. Most conversations concerning the church and social justice revolve around the Civil Rights Movement in America during the 1950s-1960s. There, churches served as meeting planning grounds, whereas the leaders and organizers of the movement were primarily (but not solely) church leaders. However, the movement was not without its challenges internally. The leadership structure was largely patriarchal and attempted to relegate women's contributions and abilities to the background. Secondly, conflicts about strategy abounded, particularly amongst SCLC and SNCC, two groups whose primary distinction was generational. The SCLC (headed up by primarily male pastors) favored a patient, almost reactive approach to the hostilities of the times. SNCC, in contrast, favored a more proactive, aggressive approach. This difference in opinion concerning

[75] Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, & Public Witness* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 142.

strategy also reared its head in denominational settings. Perhaps the most prominent example of this was the schism that occurred within the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Incorporated in the late 1950s under Reverend Joseph H. Jackson's leadership. Doctor Jerry M. Carter Jr. notes

> Under Jackson, the convention took a conservative turn in its stance on civil rights and social justice. Jackson himself became a conspicuous voice of opposition to Martin Luther King, Jr. Jackson, who was in the Booker T. Washington "school," promoted "production over protest." Since the National Baptist Convention wielded considerable influence over black Baptists, Jackson succeeded in blocking many of the member churches' participation in the Civil Rights movement. Gradualism crept into the life of the convention, and leaders such as Gardner Taylor and Martin King became disillusioned. After much conflict between the supporters of Jackson and supporters of Taylor, there was a split in 1961, during which the Progressive National Baptist Convention was formed. [76]

Similarly, each of the issues mentioned earlier continue to persist in the Black community. However, whereas the church took the lead in the Civil Rights Movement, it is now faced with the daunting task of proving its relevance to the community while functioning in the passenger's seat. We see this at play with the Black Lives Matter movement. Founded in 2013 as a response to George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin, B.L.M. (as it is popularly referred to) reflects the change in times. Organized by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, B.L.M. intentionally established a decentralized leadership approach that countered the patriarchal, heteronormative structure prominent in the Civil Rights Movement and is still prominent in many Black churches. In doing so, it creates space for the oppressed

[76] Jerry M. Carter Jr., “The Audible Sacrament: The Sacramentality of Gardner C. Taylor's Preaching” (PhD diss, Drew University, 2007), 6.

segment of the Black community to use their voice, all the while challenging the church to consider how it identifies its relationship to the community. Doctor Cornel West posits

> I think the black church failed in terms of healing the issues of patriarchy and homophobia. And those two issues are fundamental to the Black Lives Matter movement," said Cornel West, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. "White supremacy [is] evil. The Black church historically has tried to hit it head-on and oftentimes has been magnificent. But male supremacy, homophobia and transphobia are evil too. They've got to hit those with the same level of intensity as they hit white supremacy. That's the challenge and the test of the Black church these days.[77]

I assert that the church must acknowledge and address the duality of its identity to the community. It has simultaneously served as the oppressed and also oppressor. As those marginalized by the Black church historically find the strength of their voice, they no longer feel the need for the church to show up and speak on their behalf. Thus, any journey to wholeness for a Black church and community would involve acknowledging that their trauma is mutual and magnified. If the Black church was/is where one could find and embrace a sense of "somebody-ness," it must be well acquainted with the oppression (and its complicity in it) that exists and threatens the communities in which they are planted. One's blackness, I argue, carries the weight of trauma rooted in oppression that has been passed down since antebellum slavery.

There is a question to ask in consideration of the prospect of cultivating wholeness from trauma rooted in oppression. What is the signage or image that offers

---

[77] Maya King, "From Bloody Sunday to Black Lives Matter, the Role of the Black Church Is Shifting." *POLITICO*, July 31, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/30/the-role-of-the-black-church-389180.

hope? According to James Cone, that image is found in the "blackness" of Jesus Christ.[78] According to Cone, this blackness is representative of Christ's entry point into the world. If we consider the image of Christ as that who is so concerned about the poor and oppressed that He became them, suffered as they did, and died as they did, there is no more apt. image of that then of "blackness." Now, according to Cone, "blackness" is both literal and symbolic. He posits the following

> Christ's blackness is both literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal in the sense that he truly becomes One with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain, and the rhythm of our bodies.[79]

Cone's statement reinforces my assertion that the Black community/ Black church's trauma historically tends to be embedded and potentially passed down generationally. However, in conversation with that is the knowledge that Christ as "black" is acquainted with our affliction and shares in it. In doing so, Christ permits the Black church and community to reconcile its trauma.

This process of reconciliation for the church cannot be initiated or carried out without careful guidance. Various disruptive factors can insert themselves into the process, from grief to conflict, indecisiveness, and even fatigue. Thus, the church must function in partnership with a trusted entity that displays a mutual interest in their wholeness and well-being. That entity is the pastor. In the pastor's role, that individual

---

[78] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 133.

[79] Cone, *God*, 136.

assumes several functions that require trust and presence. The late Doctor Samuel DeWitt Proctor, pastor emeritus of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City in concert with the late Reverend Gardner Taylor, pastor emeritus of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, lays out these functions as follows:

- Pastor as Teacher
- Pastor as Intercessor
- Pastor as Administrator
- Pastor as Counselor [80]

In those above, the pastor's function cannot occur absent of community; they provide direction, wisdom, and guidance via a partnership. It also offers the pastoral role as "assigned" to provide aid as a matter of importance. Administrators assign teachers in educational systems to provide learning to students. Intercessors, particularly in ecclesial organizations, are assigned by the pastor to provide a presence for those identified as requiring support. Administrators, such as principals, are assigned by superintendents to collaborate with teachers to offer a space that fosters learning. Counselors, irrespective of their setting, are assigned by the administrators of their locations to provide guidance. In each instance, there is mutual responsibility on both parties to bear fruit. God has dispatched pastors to be present with God's people and participate in their narratives' progression.

The book of Nehemiah offers a tangible image of multi-tiered partnerships that create meaningful narratives. In consideration of the experiences of trauma that exist in

[80] Samuel D. Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 13-92.

some different entities, Nehemiah also provides a unique portrait of how said partnerships can reconcile trauma and re-sign how that entity leans into its identity in light of, as opposed to in spite of, its experience. The narrative focuses on Nehemiah as the protagonist, who is compelled to travel to his ancestral homeland, Jerusalem. Commonly known as the City of David due to its function as the Davidic dynasty's royal seat, Jerusalem was the epicenter of Jewish life. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem from Kiriath Jearim and established it as the worship center for Israel's united nation.[81] Later, his son Solomon built the temple there. Over time, internal strife and disobedience towards God caused this once proud nation to split and eventually be conquered. The people were taken into exile as the city laid in ruins. Nehemiah received reports concerning the condition of Jerusalem and felt compelled to act. Although Nehemiah is Jewish by lineage, he is Persian by birth and, thus, an outsider. He has never been to Jerusalem himself; therefore, his experience of Jerusalem is informed by secondhand accounts. It is also important to note that Nehemiah also functions occupationally as the cupbearer for the Persian king Artaxerxes. The cupbearer was a high-ranking, prominent position in the royal court. As wine a staple in the royal diet, the cupbearer was responsible for tasting it before serving to ensure that the king was not poisoned. Therefore, Nehemiah's position was one in which not only was he frequently in the presence of the king but likely built a relationship of trust per his responsibilities. It is this relationship dynamic that provides the opportunity to approach the king with his desire to rebuild.

[81] 2 Sam 6:1-23 NRSV.

Upon arrival in Judah, Nehemiah is confronted with two different images: the image of Jerusalem's glorious past juxtaposed with that of its grim present. The scriptural text describes in detail the condition of the city:

> Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. [82]

It is interesting to note, per several biblical scholars, that many exiles returned to Jerusalem around 535 BCE, which is about 90 years before Nehemiah's arrival. Although the temple was rebuilt per Nehemiah's contemporary Ezra[83], the remainder of the city was in complete ruins. I believe that the lack of extensive rebuilding reflected social trauma; a notion that is buoyed in *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament:*

> In 587, in the second incursion of Nebuchadnezzar's armies into Judah (the first being in 598), everything valued by the citizens of Jerusalem was terminated in a harsh way:
> - The Davidic dynasty was nullified, and the king ignobly taken away,
> - The city of Jerusalem, locus of Yahweh's promise to Israel, was razed and
> - The temple, place of Yahweh's assured presence, was devastated.

---

[82] Neh. 2:12-14 NRSV.

[83] Per John J. Collins, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally counted as one book and regarded as a single entity in the Hebrew Bible through the Middle Ages due to the similarity in writing style and information. Considered by some scholars to be part of the Chronicler's history, Collins states that "Ezra and Nehemiah are two separate books in all modern bibles, but they are closely bound together and are evidently the work of one author or editor. Accordingly, they are referred to as Ezra-Nehemiah. Collins, John J. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, pg. 428.

> All that was visible and institutional, all that seemed theologically guaranteed by Yahweh's faithfulness, all that gave symbolic certitude and coherence, all that was linked to significance, identity and security, was gone. Judah as an identifiable state was swept away, victim of imperial ruthlessness.[84]

The language offered to describe the extent of loss that Judah experienced mirrors that of Sycamore Hill. The experience of loss, in both instances, is not relegated to brick and mortar. Instead, the brick and mortar signify God's presence, identity, and sense of security.

Curiously enough, Nehemiah does not approach the people with preconceived notions; instead, he takes the opportunity to see for himself the city's conditions. Nehemiah does not blindly assume what ails the community. Instead, he is intentional about going to the community and becoming acquainted with the community to address its needs. Nehemiah engages in a thorough process to identify the community's immediate needs, after which he rallies said community to participate in rebuilding the city.

- Nehemiah and his men inspect the condition of the city at night.
- Nehemiah shares what he has witnessed with the community leadership.
- Nehemiah invites them to, in light of the conditions, participate in rebuilding the city walls.

However, within verse 17, Nehemiah intentionally communicates a partnership or joint responsibility for participating in this work. "Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of

---

[84] Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence F. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 334.

Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.'"[85] Although ultimately leading the building project, Nehemiah is not depicted as a salvific presence but a priest-prophetic one. Thus, despite the challenges that eventually arise, Nehemiah and the people's relationship is a fruitful one. Per Nehemiah 6:15, completion of the wall took 52 days. It does not reflect a complete, finalized rebuild of the entire city but an invitation to continue performing "good work."

The essence of Nehemiah's model can be referred to as the "Nehemiah Principle." This principle concedes the underlying and visible dynamics that existed during Nehemiah's undertaking, and exist also in the now for the church. It takes into consideration the challenges that arise within communities and their leadership in the form of resource scarcity, contextual despair, exterior opposition, internal conflicts and other dynamics that present themselves. In doing so, the Nehemiah Principle also offers a framework by which the mentality and motivation of the community can be recalibrated from the inevitable discouragements that arise to the inspired direction God establishes.

Nehemiah's experience entering a daunting assignment is not dissimilar to that of a pastor entering a new season of pastoral leadership, particularly in an established Black church. Upon arrival, there is frequently incredible pressure to make an immediate impact with minimal changes. There may be an expectation that the pastor will be the "savior" for both the church and the community. This salvific model is unfairly thrust upon the pastor

[85] Neh. 2:17 NRSV.

upon arrival, potentially causing rushed, ill-conceived, and poorly planned decisions that can compromise relationship-building integrity with the congregation. *In Leading Your African American Church through Pastoral Transition*, Doctor Ralph Watkins acknowledges that "the various circumstances of transitions call for nuanced approaches to ushering each congregation into the new tenure of pastoral leadership."[86]He then identifies four congregations or circumstances that one may enter:

- **Start-Up Congregations**: where the congregation and pastor must come together and build a foundation to resurrect a dead or near-dead church[87]
- **Turnaround Congregations**: where the church needs massive reorganization and a biblically-centered focus if it hopes to survive[88]
- **Realignment Congregations**: where the church has significant strengths, but it also has serious challenges or constraints that are hindering its future success and clarity of direction[89]
- **Sustain-Success Congregations**: where the new pastor and congregation have to nurture the existing growth with minimal changes.[90]

It is important to note that the onus for potential relationship conflicts does not lie solely with the church in which the pastor is entering; the pastor also potentially brings into the relationship practices or a mentality that is counterintuitive to church growth. Canadian journalist and family therapist Len Hjalmarson writes

> There exists the unspoken assumption that leaders have more to give than others and that those who "follow" need us more than we need them. In reality, the firm offers one gift and the weak another. Until we die to the idea that we are somehow "ahead of" or "above" the community of faith around us, we will continue to be

---

[86] Ralph C. Watkins, *Leading Your African American Church through Pastoral Transition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010), 39.

[87] Watkins, *Leading*, 42.

[88] Watkins, 44.

[89] Watkins, 46.

[90] Watkins, 48.

> frustrated in our attempts to have an authentic community that combines real relationships with real discipleship.[91]

In conversation with Watkins, I surmise that to identify and establish the nuanced approach required to nurture the relationship between pastor and people, an organic, flexible blueprint for the relationship's beginning would be essential. I believe that the Nehemiah principle offers a suitable model for establishing this relationship in a way that re-signs the pastoral presence as "a part of" and not "apart from" the congregation. This re-signing compels the congregation to partner with the pastor, and vice versa, to establish a healthy, vibrant, influential church community where everyone can participate. This re-signing also emphasizes the importance of being present and protecting against the inevitable discouragements that oftentimes disrupt meaningful progress.

Pastoral transitions are a frequent occurrence, irrespective of denomination. Whether due to retirement, resignation, relocation, or death, churches often experience leadership change. There exist denominational resources, books, and workshops offered to churches to prepare them for new pastoral leadership. However, per my experience, there appears to be a shortage of resources that guide pastors entering new assignments. The new pastor must contend with a series of factors, including (but not limited to): the congregation's experience with the previous pastor, socio-economic factors impacting the

---

[91] Len Hjalmarson, “Kingdom Leadership in the Postmodern Era,” *Christianity.ca* (accessed December 2,2020), https://www.christianity.ca/page.aspx?pid=11722.

church / surrounding community, history, family dynamics, and organizational power dynamics.

In some cases, pastors may be promoted from within; if the church has an established assistant pastor or youth pastor, they may be compelled to retain them for the sake of familiarity. However, I believe that many new pastors, including myself, have limited exposure to the congregations they have been "called" to lead. As such, they feel intense pressure coming in to meet any if not all the expectations thrust upon them. *In Reviving the Black Church*, author Thabiti Anyabwile notes:

> "What comes to mind when you think of a pastor's role in the church and the community? Most of us have rather long lists of expectations and hopes for pastors. It is difficult to imagine any one profession or calling requiring more of its occupants than pastoral ministry. Some of the expectations come from outside the church, from community members in need and critics enraged. Other expectations come from the members inside the church. And all of these expectations pile atop those the pastor already has for himself."[92]

The pressure to manage multiple expectations can adversely impact the image the pastoral figure wishes to embody. This becomes more complex within the Black church, where the social and historical contexts of the communities yearn for a pastoral model that represents a "salvific" presence; that is, one who leads the people to experience some form of freedom. This model is assigned to Moses concerning the Israelites, Harriet Tubman concerning the escaped slaves in the Underground Railroad, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in connection to Black America during the Civil Rights Movement in America.

---

[92] Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 99.

While understandable, the label of "savior" is at its most basic denominator unfair. It attempts to "deify" the pastor and discount God's power that equips the pastor to perform the work of ministry.

Furthermore, the label places this unreasonable expectation of the pastor's role as hierarchical and not relational. Thus, a healthy re-signing of this pastoral image aligned with Nehemiah would be that of the pastor-prophet synthesis I alluded to back in chapter 1. At first glance, this is a peculiar notion; Nehemiah is not by definition a priest/pastor or prophet. In the Old Testament, both entities carry distinct roles and criteria by which they function.

PRIEST

According to Marty Stevens, "as the one who has regular contact with the Divine, priests stand at the intersection of heaven and earth."[93] Assuming the role as a hereditary birthright[94], the priest functioned as the mediator of God's presence. They were responsible for sacrificial duties, divination, intercessory prayer, and anointing of kings, amongst other worship aspects of ancient Israelite life. Akin to the hierarchal distinctions

[93] Marty E. Stevens, *Leadership Roles in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 64.

[94] The priestly line of ancient Israel originated from the Tribe of Levi, or "Levites." There also appears to be a distinction between Levites as a whole, and the descendants of Aaron, who are specifically consecrated for the priestly duties (Exodus 28-29). There are instances of individuals outside the lineage who perform tasks normally relegated to the priests (Samuel's service under Eli, for example), but for the most part, the responsibility was placed upon descendants of Aaron.

of pastoral roles, there is a hierarchal distinction in the role of priests in ancient Israel. In addition to the high/chief priest, Ezra 7:24 refers not only to the priests and Levites but also to a group of priestly assistants or sub-priests, including "the singers, the doorkeepers, the Temple servants, or other servants of this house of God." [95]However, the high priest, or as known in post-exilic literature as the "chief priest," alone was able to enter the Holy of Holies to intercede to God on behalf of the people. Nehemiah, by hereditary birthright, cannot function as a priest, although some scholars, such as Rabbi Isaiah di Trani, identify Nehemiah as a *kōhēn, or priest*[96]. However, Nehemiah does embody a number of the high priestly responsibilities, at least on the surface. First, although the temple has been rebuilt at this point and priests are functioning in their role, Nehemiah assumes the responsibility of giving guidance towards rebuilding the city. Perhaps, in the community's eyes, he represents God's presence and promises to restore this once proud nation.[97] Nehemiah is essentially "led" to perform this work, as he attests to in Nehemiah 2:12. [98]Secondly, Nehemiah takes on the community's administrative responsibilities, insomuch that eventually, the king appoints him to be governor over all

---

[95] Ryan Bonfiglio, "Priests and Priesthood on the Old Testament," *Oxford Biblical Studies Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed December 2, 2020, http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/priests.xhtml.

[96] H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 17.

[97] Jer. 29:10 NRSV.

[98] "Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode." Neh. 2:12 NRSV.

Judah.[99] This is consistent with the high priest's function as the head of state in monarch rule. Nehemiah 5:1-12, as the community is rife with controversy over the poor's unfair taxation, Nehemiah takes on the moral obligation of taking the offenders to task for their practices. He also instructs the priests to observe the nobles and officials vow to return everything they claimed through unfair taxation. These actions resemble what Lincoln and Mamiya portray as the "priestly" function of the Black church, as Nehemiah maintains the community's spiritual life during their building project. As priestly churches, according to Lincoln and Mamiya, are focused on survival, the actions of Nehemiah emphasize the community surviving the different threats to the project, whether they be the looming presence of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem in chapter 4 or the internal strife that is addressed in chapter 5.

PROPHET

In the Old Testament, the word "prophet" references those who function as a spokesperson, or mouthpiece, for the Divine. Akin to the high priest, the prophet functions as an intermediary between the community and God, albeit in a different fashion. Per *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*:

> Intermediaries stand between the worlds of the gods and humans, the worlds of the sacred and the profane. And they do this in diverse ways. They can personify the sacred power of the Deity (Elijah in 2 Kgs 1), they can utter words on behalf of the Deity to humans (Hos 4:1), they can utter words on behalf of humans to the Deity (Amos 7:2), they can see things in the world of the sacred that other humans cannot see (Zech. 3), or they can participate in deliberations of the divine council (Isa 6). They can even offer their own words as prophets (Jer. 28:7-9). Moreover,

> they are remembered as communicating – whether speaking, writing or acting – that which they had received from the world of the Deity.[100]

We have no textual indication that Nehemiah is called to function as a prophet; outside of the aforementioned rabbinical literature that labels him a priest, Nehemiah's only stated vocations are cupbearer and, later, governor. However, akin to the priest role, Nehemiah does display "prophetic" tendencies. For one, as prophets have emerged in times of significant socio-political changes, Nehemiah enters Judah at a pivotal point in its history. The region still carries value; this is evident by the king's willingness to dispatch Nehemiah and the conflict brought by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. The rebuild would shift the perception of Judah from a ransacked, rundown relic of its former self to a community that, given its illustrious past, could eventually reassert itself as a significant power.

Furthermore, as a prophet's position is not a hereditary right but commissioning of sorts, Nehemiah embodies such, I believe by his statement in chapter 2, verse 12. Here Nehemiah indicates that God had placed the motivation to be concerned for Judah in his heart. Suppose Lincoln and Mamiya's assertion that prophetic functions are engaged in liberation and political concerns are valid for the Black church. In that case, Nehemiah displays such per his resolving the community's internal conflict concerning the poor in chapter 5. Again, as previously stated, the roles of priest and prophet do not appear to be

---

[100] Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 300-301.

opposed, as Lincoln and Mamiya posit, but in actuality carry significant connectivity strands. Thus, a synthesis of the two roles offers the opportunity to assume traits assigned to each without actually functioning in the official capacity of either.

The Black pastor functions similarly as Nehemiah, thus assuming the pastor-prophet synthesis. Akin to the priest, the pastor is by definition the spiritual overseer of a community's religious activities, specifically the church. In contrast to the priest, however, the pastor's function is not a hereditary right (although several preacher's kids may suggest otherwise) but a compulsion or calling. In this function, as the church and community contend with opposition in the form of oppression, socio-economic and political factors, the pastor becomes the mouthpiece by which the word of God goes forth. The pastor also functions as the ritual leader; this is no more evident in the Baptist church. During the ordinance of the Eucharist, the pastor may lead the congregation in an affirmation of faith or church covenant. As both are generally offered monthly in routine, they become aspects of ritual and remembrance for the community. Again, the pastor is not functioning apart from the community but as a part of the community, sharing in presence and participation. Take, for example, a staple of many Black Baptist church communion rituals: the church covenant. There are many variations of this covenant, which are often read in the moments preceding the sacraments' distribution. The covenant language denotes communal participation; the pastor and congregation's activity reciting the covenant in concert with each other offers the same.

> Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior; and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **we** do now in the

> presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.[101]

Each subsequent section emphasizes community with the words "we engage" to agree with all parties present: God and people, God and pastor, pastor and people, people and people. As a ritual, the covenant, and other routine practices within the church community's life, reveal the whole to itself. It forms bonds of remembrance, as voices or bodies function in unison, thus embodying the Apostle Paul's words that "now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."[102] By emphasizing connections, the pastor, church, and community can begin partnering together on the journey to becoming. In doing so, all entities recognize what each brings to the table and collaborates for mutually beneficial outcomes.

Since the "pastor-prophet" synthesis functions in partnership with the church, it is vital to offer commentary concerning how it empowers the church to embrace its inherent pastoral-prophetic identity. In 1520, German theologian Martin Luther penned a series of tracts to establish the fundamental principles of the Great Reformation. In one of those tracts, *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,* Luther introduces the doctrine of the priesthood of

---

[101] National Baptist Publishing Board, “Church Covenant” In *the New National Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Triad Publications, 2005), 4.

[102] 1 Cor. 12:27 NRSV.

believers. [103] Although never explicitly using that phrase, Luther asserts that all believers are consecrated to the priesthood through the ritual of baptism, citing I Peter 2:9 and Revelation 5:10. Luther further states that the only actual distinction between clergy and laity is the office, and that distinction does not preclude one's access to God through Jesus Christ. Luther states

> Therefore, just as those who are now called "spiritual" -- priests, bishops or popes -- are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacra- ments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities, -- they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bod- ily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.[104]

I imagine the priesthood of all believers as a deliberate invitation to participate in the body of Christ as an interdependent unit; that is, one that shares space and responsibility in service and sacrament. It does not dismiss the unique responsibilities that may come with particular roles; however, it encourages the church to be viewed less as a gathering place with distinct divisions and more so as a gathering of unique persons who share in the body of Christ. This gathering intentionally makes room for all while dispersing leadership and activity responsibility from solely the pastor to a shared responsibility within the congregation. A byproduct of this, I believe, is that as the community

---

[103] Martin Luther, "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes* II (Philadelphia, PA: A. J. Holman Company, 1915).

[104] Luther, *Works of Martin Luther,*3.

witnesses the congregation creating room for the diversity of its members, it would view the church less from the lens of suspicion and more so from the lens of solidarity when it seeks to engage the community. Furthermore, witnessing the church create a system of shared responsibility and solidarity lends credence to its ability to function as a support for the community in moments of crisis.

Now, for the community to look towards the church in times of crisis, the church must experience the same re-signing from "priest" to "pastor" as the pastor, through communion as ritual and relationship. Holy Communion is a sacrament that commemorates the death of Christ and new life for believers over the sharing of bread and wine (or juice). Doctor Stephanie Buckhannon Crowder summed it up as the following:

> Holy Communion *commemorates* Jesus' redeeming grace, *celebrates* God's limitless love, and *anticipates* the day when the faithful will eat and drink at heaven's welcome table. Bread, wafers, or crackers represent Jesus' broken body. The use of wine or (more commonly) grape juice symbolizes his shed blood.[105]

The Communion scene is ritualistic; I can recall vividly every First Sunday as a youth at the Calvary Baptist Church, where the ritual would be enacted in a very performative yet sacred fashion. The lights would dim in the sanctuary as hymns would be played in the background. Then, the congregation would in unison read the church covenant found in

---

[105] Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, "Lectionary Commentaries," *The African American Lectionary* (King of Prussia: The African American Lectionary, January 6, 2008), http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=3.

the front of the New National Baptist Hymnals that adorned the rear of each pew. Once the reading concluded, prayer was offered, and the sacraments were distributed to the congregation by the deacons. Following the distribution, the pastor would lead us in the partaking of said sacraments. For myself, and perhaps others, the ritual gradually gave way to relationship; although the scene experienced minimal variation from its routine, how I viewed it changed. The emphasis was no longer on the sacraments, the gold trays that contained them, or the scene itself. Instead, it became centered on gathering persons from different walks of life who were received and welcomed to the proverbial table to share in Christ's suffering. While leading the congregation in the ritual, the pastor modeled for those who were unclear or unfamiliar with the appropriate responses to take, thereby permitting the congregation to make the experience personal. At this point, the ritual itself takes a back seat to the relationships formed by communing with God and each other. This shift from "priest" to "pastor," according to Doctor Simpson, is appropriate for "*the emphasis of Priest is about the ritual; Pastor is about the people*."[106] It also becomes tangible in light of the pandemic, which has forced churches to find new ways to participate in ritual. For Sycamore Hill and others, a drive-in model has been adopted, which permits the congregation to gather together, albeit in separate vehicles. They are in vicinity of the building; however, instead of being constrained by the walls of the church, the ritual is now held in open terrain. This shift in location offers a unique, open invitation for the surrounding community and commuters passing by to become curious concerning what is taking place, and to participate in it. This openness also shifts

[106] Gary V. Simpson, message to author, March 4, 2021.

the attention away from the building itself, and places the focus on the community who gathers.

Communion also becomes re-signed from a ritual of sacrament to a means by which the community encounters and shares space with God and each other. Simpson also emphasizes the shift from ritual to relationship in speaking of navigating the Concord Baptist Church of Christ through the present pandemic:

> In crisis, it's important to flatten the hierarchy of communication whenever possible. Although I would not see the congregation regularly, it was important for them to see me, because we are a visual culture and because they could, in seeing me, see the posture and behavior I was modeling. We all produce the types of members that the people witness in us. I wanted them to see me sheltered in place at home. I wanted them to hear expressions of my faith, to see my best wishes and prayers for their safety and survival, to witness my leaning into God in prayer.[107]

In this instance, Simpson offers a model of pastoral guidance in a time of crisis for the church. Along with the church leadership, he created a new ritual of teleconference calls and subsequently evolved that practice from a straightforward routine to a relationship-building act. As pastor, he is looked to for guidance and direction and offers both while communing with God first, and then his congregation. In doing so, he equips and empowers his congregation to model the same. In the article, Simpson does not shy away from the challenges faced in the church or the surrounding community; instead, he

---

[107] Gary V. Simpson, "Gary V. Simpson: The Pastoral Challenge of a Brooklyn Church and COVID-19." *Faith & Leadership*, July 7, 2020. https://faithandleadership.com/gary-v-simpson-pastoral-challenge-brooklyn-church-and-covid-19.

partners with the church and community to acknowledge the times for what they are and create a platform by which the challenges of the times can be confronted.

Simpson's methodology is not merely pastoral but also prophetic as he acknowledges the plight of the Brooklyn community and partners with the church to address it. He does not shy away from the effects of the pandemic; rather, in acknowledging "the building that we closed until further notice would be all that closed,"[108] he offers guidance to the congregation to continue the work of ministry, not daunted by the challenges faced. In doing so, he models and encourages his congregation to embrace its prophetic witness. As the pastor-prophet is a synthesized role for pastoral identity, the same applies for the church, which said pastor is called to lead. In *The Prophethood of All Believers*, Doctor J. Deotis Roberts lays out a compelling argument for the need of the oppressed to experience a Christ that is relatable and relational in their suffering from personal and systemic evil. Roberts asserts that the image of the incarnate Christ made real creates a secure faith, particularly in the Black experience. Roberts writes:

> A real incarnation includes the total enfleshment of God in the earthly Jesus. His death "under Pontius Pilate" makes a political statement. His birth, witness among the dispossessed, his preaching to the poor, his visits to prisoners, his healing ministry are all part of the gospel. To Jesus, sin and evil, the temptations "that all flesh is heir to," is real. He opposed evil in high places, in Jewish circles as well as Roman circles. But it was the sins of the entire human family that lead him to

[108] Simpson, “The Pastoral Challenge”, https://faithandleadership.com/gary-v-simpson-pastoral-challenge-brooklyn-church-and-covid-19.

> his death on the cross. Jesus confronts the powers of evil and death. But God raised him. This is the stuff out of which a secure faith is born.[109]

As the Black church strives to reintegrate itself into the local community, it cannot turn a blind eye to society's evils. Christ faced those evils head-on; if the black church is to be authentic to the image of Christ, it cannot ignore the very things Christ was willing to confront. Otherwise, its prophetic voice and mission are called into question. However, in doing so, the church cannot pick and choose which times are convenient for exercising its prophetic voice. As Roberts identifies the cross as the consequence of Christ's willingness to confront the evils of the present age, there are consequences for church and community if the church does not consistently and uniformly confront society's evils.

It hearkens back to the Black Lives Matter Movement and its initial rejection of the church as a leader in the movement. According to those in the movement, one of the glaring criticisms of the Black church was its refusal to be consistent concerning the evils in society that persisted not only in the communities the churches were located in but also within the congregations that comprised the churches. It appeared hypocritical for the church to denounce discrimination when the church itself was willfully complicit in the same. Another complaint lodged against the Black church is its dependency on its past role in the Civil Rights Movement as a means of claiming unearned authority relative to the Black Lives Matter Movement, which in effect would push aside the younger activists who spurred the movement. Doctor Eddie Glaude, Jr., offering commentary concerning

---

[109] J Deotis Roberts, *The Prophethood of All Believers: An African American Political Theology for Ministry* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 36.

the current state of the Black church in a HuffPost article entitled "The Black Church is Dead," refers to this "looking back" of sorts as part of "the routinization of black prophetic witness."[110] Glaude identifies the church's penchant for referencing its past accomplishments as a means by which the church attempts to escape accountability for prophetic engagement in the present times. In doing so, according to Glaude, the church loses its transformative power. Glaude states

> Too often, the prophetic energies of black churches are represented as something inherent to the institution, and we need only point to past deeds for evidence of this fact. Sentences like, "The black church has always stood for..." "The black church was our rock..." "Without the black church, we would have not..." In each instance, a backward glance defines the content of the church's stance in the present — justifying its continued relevance and authorizing its voice. Its task, because it has become alienated from the moment in which it lives, is to make us venerate and conform to it.[111]

I agree with Glaude's assertion for a few reasons. First, many of society's struggles that the church engaged "prophetically" in the past still exist today, in the forms of racism, discrimination, a burgeoning drug culture, predatory lending, just to name a few. In light of the persistent struggle, prophetic witness cannot operate devoid of "with-ness" or showing up in the struggle and publicly acknowledging its adverse effects. Dwelling on past exploits without present participation raises questions of whether the church has abandoned the community or whether the church's previous display of "prophetic witness" was authentic.

---

[110] Eddie Glaude, "The Black Church Is Dead." *HuffPost* (New York: *The Huffington Post*, August 23, 2012), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.

[111] Glaude, "The Black Church", https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.

Secondly, and perhaps more pointedly, relegating prophetic witness solely to a specific contextual setting discounts how God has shown up in perpetuity. In prophetic literature found in the Bible, there are, according to *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, "two different rhetorical modes: the prophet speaking on behalf of God, and the prophet speaking as God." In either case, the prophetic utterances spoken were an audible reminder that God was and is present to address the plight of the people. Historically, the prophet had to appear on the community scene to hear what they had to say. Whether it be Deborah, Isaiah, John the Baptizer, Doctor King, or Doctor Prathia Hall, their presence and participation within the communities they spoke prophetically towards denotes the continuity by which God utilizes a mouthpiece within the presence of the people.

In light of acknowledging that Nehemiah's building project was not an "all-inclusive" endeavor but a partnership pointing towards journeying together, I found myself adjusting my project's framework to accommodate this. In truth, every pastor, regardless of tenure, is an "interim" pastor. By this, I mean that each of us is merely called to partner with a congregation for but a season of their journey to becoming the very church that is after God's own heart. The story of the congregation likely did not commence with us and probably would not conclude with us. In a way, we see this exemplified in Nehemiah's directive to rebuild only the city walls. In partnership with the people, he reinforces a foundation upon which future generations could embrace and call their own. However, he is specific about taking on just one segment of the rebuilding

responsibilities. Also, as a note of further emphasis, since per my experience, the pastoral identity is in fact fluid, any pastor/parish relationship must not become so swayed by the potential of "what could be" that they miss the priority of "what is." I believe that no strategic planning amount can account for the certainty that while an ultimate goal is in mind, some penultimate experiences must be encountered first. To not be present "in the moment" causes necessary lessons, opportunities for growth, and relationship building to be missed, which may adversely impact both journey and destination. Consider this present pandemic; the United States has not experienced anything remotely similar to this since the flu pandemic of 2009. That year, 60.8 million cases were reported in the United States, of which 274,304 required hospitalization. 12,469 individuals died.[112] Although the previous presidential administration had a "pandemic game plan"[113] to address the prospect of responding to a domestic and global outbreak, no one could predict the impact of COVID-19 on governments, travel, necessities, and opportunities to gather. Thus, any language to account for roles and relationships must embody some degree of fluidity.

Per my project, the language and lens of fluidity become revealed in distinct ways. To properly account for learning a congregation and concurrently leading said

---

[112] Robert Houk, "A history of pandemics in the past 100 years," *Johnson City Press* (Johnson City: Johnson City Press, July 6, 2020), https://www.johnsoncitypress.com/living/a-history-of-pandemics-in-the-past-100-years/article_2e8b4c2f-dbe2-5c15-b3f2-a52be6925a5c.html.

[113] National Security Council, "Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents," (Ann Arbor: Nimble Books, 2020).

congregation, I had to consider that the "terroir" of Sycamore Hill was ever-changing. This change was not limited to the physical community in which the church was planted but included the membership. Any expected outcomes concerning this project would have to acknowledge that everything would not be revealed immediately; once the pandemic runs its course, the congregation as a whole would be tasked with cultivating a new normal. Because the environment is still in a state of flux, any concrete plans would also require an asterisk with a note "subject to change."

Another adjustment that had to be made was that of the lens by which the project would be enacted. The project's unique aspect is that I am practically "living it"; that is, it is an ongoing extension of my present journey. In October of 2019, I assumed the pastorate of Sycamore Hill. Although there was some degree of familiarity with the church per my prior service in Greenville, I was tasked with learning my congregation in a short time. I had a total of 5 months of face-to-face time with my congregation before the pandemic emerged, which forced me to consider new ways to show up pastorally while encountering a situation I have never seen before. The pandemic's effects on the "terroir" of the church cannot prohibit the church from functioning as the church to the community. The commissioning offered by Christ to the gathered believers in Matthew does not provide stipulations for "going"; it merely states "go ye therefore." The absence of stipulations suggests that God's expectation for the church and the pastor to discharge this call to relationship, in and out of season, to bring "good news" to accompany us on the journey to becoming.

Chapter Four
"Next to Them": Cultivating Strands of Connectivity

The introduction of my project to Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church started before receiving the call to pastor. During the week leading into Sunday, August 25, 2019, I, along with my wife, was invited to the church to meet the congregation as the search committee's identified candidate. The weekend activities comprised meeting with the committee, individual ministries and auxiliaries, and preaching that Sunday morning, with the congregational vote to take place immediately following worship service.

During the meetings, one of the common questions that arose was, "what style of pastoral leadership would I embody?" Per the last line of questioning, I perceived that they were looking for specific persons they were familiar with as reference points for their models. However, to their surprise and confusion, I offered up Nehemiah as the model I have been curious about for the previous year. Prompted to elaborate further, I articulated that Nehemiah's book is rich with the themes of construction, community, and cooperation.

In conversation with Nehemiah's deliberate approach to the building project, said themes aroused curiosity about whether this model would ease the adverse dynamics that often accompany a new pastor/church relationship. I expressed being drawn to Nehemiah 2:18, c and d clause: "They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good

work."[114] This concept of beginning "good work" became the underlying influence of the pastorate and the project.

To assist in the formation and implementation of my project, I first identified and formed a contextual advisory team. These individuals reflected the diversity of Sycamore Hill's membership and were well informed about the factors that would impact the onset of my pastoral journey.

- Reverend Jesse Chadwick: the assistant to the pastor of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Reverend Chadwick functioned as my predecessor's right hand for over 20+ years. Ordained at the Eighth St. site, Rev. Chadwick has served as the "de-facto" executive pastor, especially during the periodic bouts of illness Rev. Parker encountered.
- Mrs. Ella Harris: a long-term member of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church and unofficial church historian. Baptized in the original First and Greene edifice in 1963, Mrs. Harris, in tandem with her husband, Trustee Alton Harris, has been instrumental in providing the history and dynamics surrounding the church's initial relocation.
- Mrs. Audreinee Harvey-Tyson: longtime Secretary of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Mrs. Harvey Tyson provided in-depth information concerning the church and community and connections to former members while setting up meetings and providing historical documents about the project.
- Reverend Doctor Jan Newell-Byrd: Associate Minister of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Author of "Testimony of a Kept Woman," Doctor Newell-Byrd brings years of ministry analysis experience, coupled with a plethora of community engagement workshops in Greenville, NC.
- Mrs. Debbie Woodson: Member of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church; facilitator of Noonday Prayer Service and Sunday School. A retired social worker by trade, Mrs. Woodson provides a working knowledge of the socio-economic dynamics of the surrounding community and what has historically been performed to address said dynamics.
- Mr. Mark Woodson: Member of Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church and chair of the pastoral search committee. President of the 5 Prime Media Group, LLC, Mr. Woodson offers a detailed portrait of the pastoral search process, as well as a wealth of familiarity with the community at large.

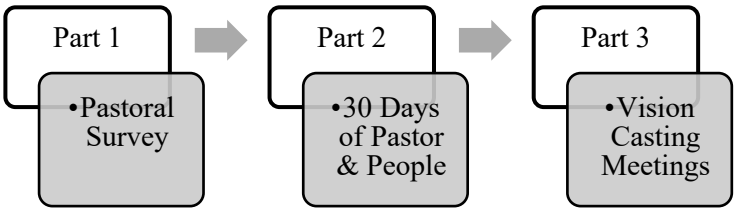
---

[114] Neh. 2:18, NRSV

In addition to the Contextual Advisory Team, I also had a peer mentor to partner with, communicate ideas, and share experiences. The Reverend Harold Jolley is the pastor/teacher of the Second Macedonia Baptist Church in Philadelphia, PA. Serving there for eight years, Reverend Jolley brings a wealth of familiarity and insight into pastoring historic Black Baptist congregations.

The initial conversation expressed the project's organic nature, as it would be unfolding on the go. In the discussion, I posed to each the potential blind spots or challenges that may arise that I would need to be mindful of. The consensus was that while the congregation would participate in planned events, there may be some reluctance to share, as relationship dynamics with the previous leadership did not foster an atmosphere of openness. Furthermore, when it came to church or leadership meetings, they were often poorly attended. As such, the recommendation was made to approach the immediate church leadership with any plans, permit them, due to their familiarity with the congregation, to take the onus for encouraging participation and other tasks to alleviate some of the project's responsibilities and the pastorate.

After the formation and initial meetings with my team, my next step was to construct the project's outline and determine the timeline. As I was using the book of Nehemiah as my guide, I wanted to follow Nehemiah's progression as closely as possible. I identified three segments that I desired to employ for the sake of methodology.



Part 1

For the first part of the study, I intended to survey pastors of Black Baptist churches concerning their experiences within the first 90 days of transitioning into a new assignment. The surveys would serve general information concerning context, years of experience, and church demographics, amongst other pertinent information, to identify trends, points of convergence, and divergence. Also, I aimed to gauge the process of those pastors ingratiating themselves into the church and community. I believed these surveys would offer insight into the thought processes, plans, and influences that pastors have when establishing their role within a new church. I planned to maintain this survey process for 30 days.

Part 2

For the second part of the study, I desired to establish what I called "30 Days of Pastor & People." This endeavor would offer members and ministries the opportunity for intentional communal and dialogue time with me as pastor. Within the allotted time slots (approx. 15-20 minutes), I believed that it would provide an opportunity for members to articulate their stories, their needs, and their experiences, at least on the surface, to offer a detailed portrait of the Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church. Meeting with the

individual ministries would provide the opportunity to see how each ministry self-identifies, its role, responsibility, and relevance to the church body and local community. From the people's perspective, I believed that this would offer a unique opportunity to experience a pastoral presence that is both attentive and aware of what is valuable to them, with hopes of affirming the pastor and people as "a part of" vs. "apart from." This segment timeline would also run for 30 days.

Part 3

For the third part of the study, I planned to offer a vision or strategic plan of action primarily based upon the analysis of information gathered in parts 1 and 2. To facilitate implementation, the church ministry and auxiliary leads would participate in "Vision Casting" workshops geared towards encouraging participation in the church's rebuilding stage. My desire for this stage was to emphasize connections, that is, to identify tangible ways to form meaningful relationships with the individual congregant, the corporate ministries of the church, and the surrounding community. (Once a Week for 30 days)

In determining this course of study, I ultimately decided to approach it from a postmodern narrative approach. Due to the nature of relationship building, coupled with the intent to have this play out organically, I wanted to avoid engagements that felt like formal interviews or data collection inquiries. The postmodern narrative approach offered appeal to me, as

> "it forsakes attempts at objectivity by taking a kenotic, or emptied approach instead and assuming that the leader's/researcher's own story (culture, tradition,

> personal family history, era, etc.) is but one of a host of narratives that are intersecting and influencing a current ministry setting."[115]

In adopting this approach, I could acknowledge how my story, in concert with the members, plays out in this joined narrative. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of storytelling as the proverbial paintbrush to create a detailed image of the contextual setting, including details and factors that surround and influence said context without making dangerous presumptions. Savage and Pernell state

> The researcher does not presume in advance that specific changes are needed. Rather than assume the role of change agent, the leader/researcher facilitates the uncovering of the "problem-saturated" part of the ministry site's narrative, evokes and helps tease apart the story of concern or opportunity from the emerging "preferred" story, and joins with the community as it "rewrites" its story under the influence of the Spirit.[116]

To me, this approach is very much in line with Nehemiah's process of surveying the city and partnering with the people, as opposed to dictating the changes he presumed needed to occur absent of input or buy-in.

After settling on the approach, the next step was to establish the timeline for enacting each of the three stages. There were some points of consideration that I could not ignore. For one, I needed time to get settled, to watch, and to be present with my congregation before launching this project. I transitioned from Zion Hill to Sycamore Hill

---

[115] Carl E. Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 110.

[116] Savage and Presnell, *Narrative Research*, 110

without a break in between. In hindsight, I realize now that taking a break would have helped me see my new context with "fresh eyes" while avoiding early ministry fatigue. To prevent replicating past mistakes, I believe that a break would have allowed sitting with and processing the experience I was exiting and pulling the necessary lessons into my current context.

The second point of consideration was the church's activities. October marks the busiest month on the church's calendar. In addition to planning an installation, the church's homecoming/church anniversary was approaching, and finalizing the gateway plaza's construction plans. The third point of consideration was presence. The congregation was fortunate to have Doctor Kenneth Hammond, the Union Baptist Church's retired pastor in Durham, NC, function in the interim role. Due to Reverend Parker's illness, the church has not had a consistent, "permanent"[117] pastoral presence in the pulpit in years. Thus, I wanted the church's realization that it has a new pastor to sink in visually.

The final point of consideration was how much information to share concerning this project. As stated before, I did not want this experience to give off formal vibes.

---

[117] I alluded earlier to pastors as all essentially being “interim” in nature, as eventually their tenures will conclude. In this instance, when speaking of a “permanent” presence, I am referring to the congregation’s expectation that a new pastor will, barring any controversial or major reasons, remain with the congregation for an extended period of time. Also of note, in-between my predecessor’s last few years dealing with illness, he was confined to a wheelchair, thus not physically able to preach, much less give remarks, from the actual physical pulpit.

When persons are in projects, groups, or events in which there is observation going on by unknown entities, they tend to behave unnaturally. While this is a project in itself, it is also an organic, ongoing building process not being performed in a petri dish or as an experiment. Thus, I decided to decline to make the congregation aware of the project stages outside of the immediate leadership and team. Although they would participate in two of the three phases, their participation was not predicated on knowing the project's particulars. I realized that the initial "first 90 days" timeline was not feasible; my team suggested six months, or 180 days, which I readily accepted.

I launched the project in January to avoid the commotion of the holiday season. The first segment of the study adopted was launching the survey to gauge pastoral experiences at the onset of pastor-parish partnerships. To narrow the scope, I deliberately focused on collecting responses from Black Baptist church pastors. This was primarily due to differences in how denominations "call" their pastor.[118] As some, like myself, have pastored in multiple contexts, I left the questions open-ended so that they can speak towards the experiences most vivid in their recollection. The framing of the questions was to reflect Nehemiah's inexperience entering his role in Judah and potential themes that may have accompanied him there, such as the perception of the position. Due to time constraints and the desire to ensure anonymity to encourage participation, I declined to do formal interviews instead of placing a series of discussion-formatted questions within the

[118] Baptist polity affirms local church autonomy; that is, there is no parent body by which a pastor is dispatched and placed (unlike Episcopalian, Methodist bodies who make the determination)

survey. The survey contained 15 questions; per the responses offered, although a small sample size, I could draw a series of conclusions.

The first batch of questions was in consideration of experience entering into the pastorate. Of the 15 responders, 53.3% of them embarked upon their first pastorate as a young adult (25-34); 80% indicated having previous ministry experience, with the positions of youth pastor/minister and associate minister being the most frequent (66.7% apiece). 26.67% of respondents had leadership experience, albeit with a different denomination. In discussing the church of call's prior experience, not surprisingly, only 13.33% of the responders had familiarity with the said church. When posed with the pastorate's preparedness, the numbers were almost even, with 53.33% indicating not feeling prepared than the 46.67% who did feel ready.

This data made sense, particularly considering the second batch of questions that helped establish rapport with the congregation. 53.33% of the responders entered into a church that they perceived was in "average" condition, with 40.00% of the remaining identifying their church as "poor" condition. When broached concerning their approach for implementing their vision, the responses varied. However, most of the respondents sought congregational buy-in and consensus through learning from each other. The practices of prayer and biblical preaching and teaching were also frequent responses. Along these lines, when inquired concerning the length of time taken to implement changes, 33.3% of the respondents indicated six-eight months. The remaining participants ranged from immediately (1st week) to a few years, and in some of those

cases, some degree of backlash and resistance. Knowing that resistance of some type would take form in a pastorate, there were various responses as to how said resistance was handled. While not explicitly requested, this resistance came from members who did not vote for the pastors or those who served in leadership positions impacted by a new pastor. For the responders, the most consistent response was prayer; however, juxtaposed with prayer was the prevalence of facing the resistance head-on, which led to adverse experiences, ranging from nasty emails to an early resignation. For the others, creating compromise and offering an open dialogue to participate in the planning were consensus picks.

The final batch of questions dealt with personal perception. When asked whether the responders felt compatible with the church they were "called" to serve, an astounding 86.67% expressed that they questioned that compatibility at some point or another during their first year. Furthermore, when posed the question "did you feel supported/ in community with your congregation, or on an island to yourself," 60% of the responders indicated that they felt "somewhat supported," in contrast to 26.67% who felt no support. The remaining 13.33% expressed strong support.

The second segment of the project, "30 Days of Pastor & People", was launched in February, offering the congregation ample time to sign up via the church office. As previously stated, the segment's premise was to provide an introductory invitation of sorts to learn congregant names, faces, passions, and experiences within the church's confines. I also gave the members the option of signing up as a family or individually separate

from their partners and children. In what would be the first of many moments of fun, one of the members requested in jest to block off five slots consecutively, one in each family member's name, but only for that member. To wit, I responded, "I'll still be around after 30 days." Mrs. Harvey Tyson functioned as an exceptional scheduler and timekeeper; she placed on my desk each morning before my arrival a list of the members who were meeting with me that day. As one who was well acquainted with the congregation, she also provided information she felt I needed to be mindful of, such as relatives, recent celebrations or deaths in the family, or the members' skills.

Nevertheless, the meetings yielded some rather thought-provoking information concerning the themes of pastoral presence, church polity, worship style, and community engagement. During the first week, only eight persons had signed up; I determined early that the sessions would be informal and, to that end, would aim to allow each session to proceed organically. As each member came in at their allotted time slot, I prefaced the conversation by stating that the gathering was informal and confidential. I also indicated that it was merely the beginning of hopefully many discussions, and I wanted each of them to feel comfortable communicating with me. I offered up three consistent questions to guide the time together:

- "So, if you don't mind me asking, are you originally from the Greenville area?"
- "Tell me about your experience here as a member of Sycamore Hill?
- "When you have free time, what do you enjoy doing the most?"

After our time together, I would request any specific prayer requests and pray together with them.

Following the first week of meetings, the feedback shared by those participants to other members was overwhelmingly positive, to the degree that entire days were filled with meetings. Also, as a note of interest, feedback reached outside the church; individuals from the community who were not affiliated with the church asked if they could schedule to meet with me. I consented following the conclusion of the month. Notably, and in all honesty, I should have foreseen this coming, I discovered that 15-20 minutes was not sufficient time for everyone. While some members were relatively reserved and only wished to stay for about five to ten minutes, others were more comfortable and expressive, and those meetings extended far beyond the allotted time. For the thirty-day period, a total of eighty-six members signed up in the front office to participate, which reflected (at the time) approximately 30% of the congregation.[119]That number does not include members who requested multiple meetings, were traveling, sick and shut-in, or were busy. We began making accommodations for them for March.

The third segment of the project was to commence in March, following my installation. They were what I labeled at the time as "vision casting" meetings. The emphasis was to gather the different ministries to begin laying out the "vision" for the church's strategic plan. The intent was, using the theme of "Connections" to articulate, akin to Nehemiah 2, where the church was at present, and formulate a plan to foster

[119] A considerable percentage of the congregation is considered to be “sick and shut in”, and thus were unable to physically attend the sessions. However, I made allowances for them and performed a brief phone session, to ensure that they felt included.

growth and increased participation. However, on March 13, approximately two days before the pastoral installation and 11 days before the first vision casting meeting, the governor of NC enacted a restrictive "Stay at Home" order[120]to counter the spread of COVID-19. The church, save the services I pre-recorded in advance of the order, came to a literal halt. Subsequently, I had to pivot this segment of the project and make some significant adjustments. First, I decided to shift the language of "vision casting" to "strategic planning," which the church was more accustomed to. With the uncertainty of the pandemic's timeline and long-term implications, I decided to shelve, albeit temporarily, any consideration of a strategic plan, citing the difficulty of making any projections amid a somewhat uncertain period. However, although postponing this plan, I did not want to waste an opportunity to begin communicating the heart behind our future endeavors.

To that end, I commenced a sermon series on Nehemiah's book virtually, set to the soundtrack of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* album. Addressing the events of the first six chapters, each passing sermon built upon the process Nehemiah undertook in partnership with the people, framed around one of the songs included on Gaye's album. Paired with the sermon series was a Bible Study series to address Nehemiah's themes in a more interactive, detailed fashion. The sermon series spanned August and September,

[120] Roy Cooper, "Executive Order 116: Declaration of a State of Emergency to Coordinate Response and Protective Actions to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19," March 10, 2020, COVID-19 Orders & Directives, accessed December 8, 2020, https://www.nc.gov/covid-19/covid-19-orders.

with the bible study series running concurrently. After the series, we had a recap session in which the participants could share their thoughts concerning the text and raise any inquiries about its application to the church.

Chapter Five

"For the People Had a Mind to Work": An Image for Inspired Work.

Any discussion concerning the project's findings must consider a series of pertinent factors, some of which there was an awareness of at the onset; others emerged as time progressed. The first factor, and perhaps the one that gave me the most pause, is the nature of the project as "open-ended." For most pastors, the full revelation of their work's impact in partnership with a church does not occur during their tenure, much less a lifetime. I believe the reason for this is two-fold. First, the fluidity of pastoral identity, in conversation with the fluidity of the context in which one is planted, does not yield too many reflection opportunities. Due to the changes in our context of age, identity, cultural norms, socio-economic and political shifts, we must be present "in the moment" of our work, as it demands our attention and efforts. The second reasoning for this alludes to a statement I made in an earlier chapter. According to Doctor Gary V. Simpson, all pastors are inherently "interim" by nature, meaning that eventually, as the church continues, the pastor will be replaced by a successor. Thus, any "building project"[121] must be performed with the awareness that the pastor is contributing towards the build, but not in its entirety.

[121] In traditional Black church language, a building project refers to literal construction, renovation work performed on a church's campus and/or properties. In this instance, the phrase "building project" is used to describe the establishing of relationships, practices, rituals, etc. that become parts of the church's overall narrative.

The second factor of consideration for the project was COVID-19 and its subsequent impact on society. When announced in late February 2020, there was very little concrete information concerning COVID-19 and its potential impact. Coinciding with the Center for Disease Control's research, local and state governments were tasked to establish policies and procedures to combat this "unknown assailant." As more information became known concerning it, due to the disease's potentially fatal nature, said policies and procedures were put into place immediately, which created multiple layers of uncertainty that continue to persist through the project's completion.

This uncertainty extended not only to the different levels of government and businesses but also to the church. Subsequently, the third segment of the project, the vision casting meetings, was adversely impacted. Sycamore Hill desired but did not possess a technology/media program by which the church could offer services absent of the building. The desire for someone with a background in such was one of the more prominent criteria emphasized in the pastoral search process. This program was not restricted to the church building; quite a number of the members either were not familiar with or had access to means of technology by which they could connect virtually. Fortunately, I did have an extensive background in technology, and within a few days, virtual worship and bible study were available via social media platforms. I required considerable time, setup, and training to familiarize many of the members with their

access points to those events. Thus, attempts to gather consistently for meetings would add additional frustration to an already frustrating season, so I was determined to find a different way to convey the strategic plan.

Before the onset of the pandemic, the expectation was that the project would run its course within three months. However, as adjustments had to be made to account for the fluidity of the current season and potential future implications, I found myself revisiting my timeline and the concept of communicating a strategic plan. It did not seem wise to offer a plan encapsulating 15 years when, due to the inconsistencies in information sharing between the White House and CDC, planning for the immediate week would be daunting. To be present and respond to the church's needs in conversation with my own, I decided to place aside the strategic plan until sometime after the pandemic runs its course. In its place, we embarked upon a 2-month sermon and bible series centered on Nehemiah's book. In theory, this gave us as a congregation something to collectively focus our attention towards while combating pandemic fatigue.[122] Although the "what" of the planning could not commence, conversations concerning the "why" could. Conversely, the series also offered an opportunity to consider how our history has shaped how we have chosen to self-identify and whether that perception aligns with that of the community.

[122] https://connect.uclahealth.org/2020/07/07/7-steps-to-reduce-pandemic-fatigue/

The first segment of the project, the survey, offered an opportunity to place the participants in Nehemiah's "sandals" and contemplate what may have shaped his leadership approach. There is much concerning Nehemiah that we are not aware of, such as his age or any apprehensions he may have had, for the narrative does not give voice to those things. However, if we are to contemplate his experience as a sufficient model, there is value in contemplation.

The responses to the first batch of questions were not surprising; they reflected what criteria Black churches find attractive in pastoral candidates. The notion that most of the responders entered into their first pastorate as a young adult reflects what those congregations (and many others) identified as needs. For one, several churches desire young pastors because of a stated need to appear "revitalized." As churches and the communities in which they are planted age, they may lose their attractiveness for potential growth. Often, older churches may appear to be out of touch with the trends of the times, whether technological advances, worship experiences, or social justice endeavors. A young adult-aged pastor's presence in that church offers to communicate to the community a message that "we can relate," even if that is not the case.

Furthermore, suppose that the church cannot relate to the "going ons" of the present culture at the point of call. In that case, a young adult pastor's presence may give them hope that in due time, that pastor can teach them how to relate or draw in persons who will do the work for them. Another fallacy directly associated with this is the

presumption that the congregation can mold a younger pastor to fit its presumed needs. I would argue that this "molding" tends to become more or less "manipulating" the pastor to play a role that may counter the congregation and community needs. In this instance, the pastor may experience hostilities as they are being set up to "compete" with the previous pastoral image or an idealized image that runs counter to their identity.

The second notion to consider is that young adults attract other young adults. The presence of a young adult pastor (and perhaps, if the pastor has a partner, a young adult family) is an attractive notion for young adults as it gives the impression that they would be relevant. This made sense to me, but I wrestled with the perception that young adult pastors would address primarily "young adult issues." As a young adult and in relationships with other young adults, my experience has been that we value, seek more than anything a deep, meaningful spiritual connection with God, and be a valued part of a community of faith. Attempts to "pigeonhole" us into a particular role or segment due to our age would feel ridiculed and subsequently met with rejection. Doctor Brianna Parker highlights an example of such in *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age.* Interviewing millennials to gauge their interests per traditional church ministries, she was surprised by the lack of interest in volunteering to serve in youth ministries. When posed the question why in small groups, she records the response as the following: "They explained that they were likely expected to do grunt work and the more physical activities. They did not believe their brains were valued in this ministry except for social media and naming washed-up events so that outsiders

would expect more than what they would experience.[123]"Is this perception accurate? Perhaps. Or perhaps, this is what is unconsciously projected onto this group, even without intent. Whatever the case may be, the distinction between perception and reality could only be known if the millennials had space and opportunity to share their feelings in an area that felt safe. Nehemiah could have easily taken the accounts he had heard as truth and imposed his perception upon the people; instead, he intentionally saw the area's condition with his own eyes. Nehemiah has never functioned in a leadership capacity before (as far as we know). He is entering into a pressure-filled position that yearns for immediate results. He acknowledges that the project's success is contingent upon learning the terroir and how the community lives into it.

53.33% of the responders to the pastoral survey indicated not feeling prepared for the work. Even with the vast majority of them all holding some degree of experience (i.e., youth minister, assistant pastor, etc.), there is this unknown factor concerning a new community and pressure to figure things out quickly. Depending on their perception of the church of call's condition and the congregation's expressed urgency to address it, that individual may become quickly overwhelmed by the weight of what they presume the project entails and respond accordingly when resistance introduces itself. This question, more than any of the others, resonated with me amid the pandemic. As previously stated,

---

[123] Brianna Parker, *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age* (Dallas: Black Millennial Cafe, LLC, 2018), 50-51.

at the onset of the pandemic, to ensure that the church could continue to some degree, I took it upon myself to create and manage the church's virtual landscape, ultimately facilitating all aspects of virtual worship and Christian education programs. At least on the surface, I believed that it was the best way to be present and pastoral in the uncertainty. On the one hand, it permitted us to catch up technologically in a brief period, thus aiding our ability to adjust to the fluidity brought upon by the pandemic. However, in doing so, I ignored the enormous workload I already had on my plate, believing I was strong enough to handle everything on my plate. In truth, on a subconscious level, I was internalizing a "superhero" complex, feeling the pressure to "save" my membership from the ramifications of the pandemic. This complex is one that quite a few pastors and perhaps leaders across vocations are challenged with, for it assumes, albeit erroneously, that the organization as a whole, or the persons who comprise it, need or want "saving."

This complex was not limited to my pastoral role but also infiltrated areas within my personal life, and the weight of it all was not healthy to handle. In reality, there was no "saving" that was needed; save me. I was struggling with the pressure of the pandemic, and, coupled with my stress, it brought to the surface questions I was forced to confront:

- How do I feel about my identity as a pastor?
- Do I trust my congregation to journey with me towards an image of the church that I feel compelled to embrace?
- Do I trust myself to stay the course in the face of resistance?

These questions were birthed out of my previous pastoral experiences and the feelings of isolation that accompanied the role.

The significant number of responders indicating that they questioned compatibility with their congregations was not surprising. It takes considerable time to learn and determine the best way to be present within the relationship. That presence, I have discovered, struggles to find significance in light of the congregation's needs, juxtaposed with the pastor's needs. It calls to mind the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, who expressed in her memoir *Leaving Church,* "With just seven days in a week, where is the time to be a good preacher, teacher, pastor, prophet, celebrant, prayer, writer, foot washer, administrator, community activist, clergy colleague, a student of scripture, and wholesome exemplar of the gospel?"[124] The answer to Brown Taylor's question is, quite succinctly "there is not enough time." The new pastor's struggle, far too often, is caving under the savior complex pressures, needing to be needed, instead of taking the time to stop, breathe, and plan accordingly. As a result, the pastor may question their competency, commitment to the church (and vice versa), and an already stressful situation becomes magnified.

Nehemiah offers a helpful progression to combat this, found in verse 11: "So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days." We are not acquainted with what Nehemiah did in those three days after arrival. Perhaps he prayed, or fasted, or rested. What we do know is that there was a deliberate pause before beginning his process. The

[124]Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007), 45-46.

"pause" is a lesson that pastors would be wise to learn in the period in between entering a new assignment and launching into a building project.

- Pause, and take the time to get settled.
- Pause, and learn the people and love them simultaneously.
- Pause, and take the opportunity to pray and to preach.
- Pause, and be present in the moment, not focusing on tomorrow's tasks or yesterday's events.

Pause! This pause is best embodied in the word sabbath. I believe that the savior complex that I experienced, and perhaps others have as well, is a manifestation of disorientation; that is, a turning away from God and into ourselves. Turning away from God is problematic in itself; God is the source of our creation and our call. Attempts to turn away from God or internalize that we can perform the work absent of God will ultimately bring failure. This is not to say that this disorientation is intentional; the savior complex I embodied was not done consciously as an act of rebellion from God. Instead, it was a subconscious response to wanting to do God's work in a way that I felt was sufficient to God and God's people. However, along the way, I began depending on myself more and more, which lessened my dependence on God more and more.

While several factors contributed to my personal experience, their root was the absence of a sabbath. AJ Swoboda writes:

> To be a Christian was and is to orient one's entire life and death around Jesus Christ. Sabbath is an orientation as well – an all-encompassing turning towards the Creator God that changes everything about our lives. Sabbath is that kind of complete reorientation of our lives towards the hope and redemption of Christ's work. Sabbath baptizes our week into the grace and mercy of God.[125]

[125] AJ Swaboda, *Subversive Sabbath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2018), 9.

Sabbath-ing offers the opportunity to intentionally face where we know Christ is present within our lives. Sabbath-ing permits us to perform weekly check-ins with Christ, to center ourselves and notice if anything has shifted us away from God. Sabbath-ing also encourages us to realize that the work of ministry that we perform cannot and should not be done absent of obedience to God. How can we promote a community to live a life that models Christ when we do not practice sabbath-ing as Christ did? In hindsight, I also realize that this notion of sabbath-ing is another potential inquiry that I neglected to offer to the responders. Perhaps a regular, engaged sabbath routine would impact how we respond to the resistance we encounter and any concerns about support that may arise during the pastorate's initial stages.

The second segment of the project, "30 Days of Pastor and People", was designed to parallel, akin to the first segment, the experience of Nehemiah's nighttime excursion and subsequent encounter with the people with that of the pastor just starting in relationship with their congregation. However, in this instance, the focus is not primarily on Nehemiah's perspective but also on the Jerusalem walls, serving as a metaphor for the congregation. This segment was the most enjoyable, for it permitted me to gain a snapshot of Sycamore Hill's history, as told by those who have participated in it. The conversations were informal to offer participants an opportunity to share with as minimal obstruction as possible. The discussions were also intended not to be "all-encompassing," meaning that hopefully, they would foster additional conversations over time. In reflection, I would have been well-served to incorporate a period of prayer "to center

myself in anticipation of the interactions that would take place. This period would also permit some necessary space between the context departed and the one the pastor is entering. This space, in my opinion, is precious, as it enables the pastor to enter into the new assignment with fresh eyes and a fresh heart.

Several rather interesting revelations were offered in this segment. First, most participants expressed that, in their 10+ years of membership at the church, they had never been in the pastor's office, much less had an invitation for a one-on-one conversation. They generally expressed appreciation for my predecessor but indicated that due to his bouts of illness, and other community engagements, he often was not physically present, which projected to some the assumption that the church was not his priority. In consideration of that, specifically his health history, they repeatedly emphasized that they wanted our family around for a long time and to practice "self-care." Along those lines, members also expressed a desire for more frequent and informative communication between leadership and membership. There was a large consensus that decisions were made in the church's life without input from the congregation. In turn, this created feelings of distrust and, per their words, "disconnect." For many of them, they expressed a desire to participate and discover their gifts; yet looked to the pastor specifically to provide guidance and, for lack of a better term, permission to serve in those areas of interest. This was a rather curious revelation, as those in leadership expressed the same desire regarding communication but placed the onus on the membership to actively seek participation. They, too, expressed feelings of

"disconnect." It was also a curious revelation considering the number of activities at the church weekly. The church edifice was a high-traffic area Monday through Sunday; whether event planning meetings, Christian education events, ministry gatherings, or worship, there were always opportunities to foster connections. Perhaps, being "connected" required more than being in the same place at the same time. Being "connected" was possibly about sharing stories, experiences and viewing experiences through others' lens. By doing so, authentic connections occur in which we experience and subsequently express compassion for our neighbors.

Admittedly, this revelation excited me much. While it spoke of relationship dynamics amongst the Sycamore Hill community, it could also apply to the church's desire but difficulty connecting to the physical community in which it was located. Daily, church members and community members interacted in some way, shape, form, or fashion; however, they were not connected. The congregation, not unlike others, may argue that offering spiritual services, fellowship opportunities, and church programs should qualify as attempting to reach the community. However, this notion of disconnect compels the church, from the pulpit to the pew, to consider whether or not the services, opportunities, and programs offered meet assumed needs or actual needs.

If we consider Nehemiah as one who personifies prophetic tendencies, he offers a viable means of connecting with the community through displaying compassion towards the Jews. Evidence is found in chapter 2, verse 17, not by what Nehemiah says, but by

what Nehemiah does not say. Notice, if you will, Nehemiah does not criticize or mock the people concerning their predicament in sharing the desire to enter this building project. Instead, he acknowledges seeing what they see and shares his willingness to address the community's expressed values. Suppose we consider the pastor to embody the priest-prophet synthesis. In that case, the pastor must be compelled to emphasize meeting the community where they are, learning their actual needs, and responding as a willing participant in meeting said needs. Luther Smith gives credence to this by reminding his audience that the message offered by the Old Testament prophets "was not only characterized by criticism, but also by deep compassion."[126]The community must be able to identify the pastor and congregation as those interested and invested in who they are and what afflicts them, not for the sake of membership growth and community service, but as children of God connected by the grace and mercy that God affords us all. Smith continues

> Compassion is more than inspiring social ideals and consciousness-raising. Compassion is caring for others with an understanding of their need that emerges from knowing them. Research that gathers data on social realities is important; however, one only understands issues fully when ongoing relationships are sustained with the people who are directly affected by the issues. Consequently, living in a location where one has the opportunity to care for another by being a responsive neighbor is crucial. The neighborhood remains the primary context for these communities to exercise their prophetic calling.[127]

---

[126] Luther Smith, *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994), 143.

[127] Smith, *Intimacy & Mission*, 143.

Smith's assertion suggests a few things to a pastor entering a new context. First, getting to know the people cannot be limited to those who function between the church's four proverbial walls; it is also inclusive to those in the neighborhood where the building stands. Secondly, actual prophetic work requires awareness of what indeed afflicts a community. Within the immediate vicinity of Sycamore Hill, the makeup is primarily low or fixed income. Black families are looking for ways to make a living and stay safe in the face of social, economic, and racial disparities. Third, prophetic calling is not the responsibility of one person within the church; Christ's entire body must display a willingness to be a good neighbor. In turn, the pastor must model this behavior and encourage the congregation to respond accordingly.

A welcomed byproduct of the church's stated need of reconnecting with the community, was its willingness to participate in programs geared towards combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the congregation's expressed desire, the church was able to function as a testing and vaccination site, a distribution center for produce and other goods, and hosted a virtual town hall meeting to connect the community with the medical professionals on the front line. In addition, the church has partnered with the Vidant Medical Center to sign up the community for vaccinations, particularly those who are identified as "high-risk." The excitement over these activities was not solely due to the willingness of the congregation to participate. In actuality, members of the congregation brought a number of these opportunities to me and volunteered to spearhead the initiatives, thus ensuring that the onus for everything would not fall on me. I believe that,

as the church rose to the challenge of integrating itself into the community, it discovered a new means by which a sense of community could be fostered.

Another revelation within the 30 days of pastor and people was concerning the unresolved trauma I referenced earlier. In approximately 65% of the conversations, a reference to the original church edifice and community was made. For those who did reference it, there was a distinct difference in how it was referenced. Approximately half of the responders talked extensively about "the way things were," emphasizing the homes, businesses, community, and of course, the church building lost during the city's urban renewal. For the other half, they talked about practically the same thing, except that instead of focusing on what was lost, they spoke of the people and practices present at the church's current edifice. It identified the presence of a peculiar "in-between" space that pastors must operate from when acknowledging the story of their congregation.

It calls to mind the metaphor of a coin that Crystal Downing adeptly employs in *Changing Sign of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*. Downing states that each side of a coin or issue, depending on its use, stands in opposition to the other. However, both sides carry value, as they are part of the coin. The church's task is to maintain a view of both simultaneously, which can only be accomplished when the coin is positioned on its edge. According to Downing, "a position

on the edge looks to both past and future, to tradition and change."[128] The church cannot do it independently; there is naturally a compulsion to show a preference towards one side. However, I believe the pastor must encourage the congregation to hold its position, and in doing so, identifying the value that both tradition and change bring to the table. This position does not merely impact the congregation's perception of where it stands but also that of the pastor.

My experience at the onset of the project was that the church was besieged by unresolved trauma. After the “30 Days of Pastor and People,” I realize that is not the case. While we must acknowledge that the feeling of loss is still present, the extent of the failure in the eyes of those who were present varies. Attempts to consider the experience as "total loss" negates the whole of the story, in which rituals and people who contributed to the life of the congregation on First and Greene now do the same at Hooker Road. So, I find myself now contemplating, "what does standing on the edge of Sycamore Hill's story look like?" The appropriate answer for me, and perhaps for others who are in the early stages of their pastorate, is "to be determined." This response's primary factor is simply the need to spend time learning the terroir and people who comprise it. It is also the need to hear the stories, witness, and participate in story creation with the congregation as it journeys towards God. In doing so, the pastor helps the congregation identify the image it

[128] Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 58.

chooses to display on both sides of the coin and what that image communicates to the surrounding community.

The final segment's function was to participate in vision casting meetings, with the ultimate goal of constructing a strategic plan with the church leadership. This segment was to run parallel to Nehemiah 2:17-18, where he encourages the community to participate in the building plan. These vision-casting meetings were intended to build upon the "30 Days of Pastor and People," as the time spent with the congregation would offer insight into the church's needs. The pandemic disrupted those plans; in doing so, however, it became a blessing in disguise. Five months had passed from my start date to the planned launch of the meetings. That period was long enough to get settled, but not to explore in-depth the many dynamics that comprised the church's relationship to itself and the community.

Furthermore, the disruption permitted me to consider ways by which I could lean into a pastoral identity that was authentic to my identity and not a facsimile of the pastoral models that informed my narrative. Noting that Sunday morning worship was an opportune time to hold an audience with the congregation *en masse*, I decided to launch a sermon series centered on Nehemiah's journey. I figured, what better way to introduce partnership and participation themes than to address them sermonically. In doing so, I also wanted to be intentional about bringing the conversations to our homes.

Conclusion

Reflections concerning this project and its overall implications have been challenging. I readily admit that while I was somewhat familiar with the nature of the work to be performed per similar past experiences, I did not account for the emotional work that accompanied it. At this stage in my narrative, I wanted to give voice to potential models to aid other ministers entering into pastorates. In doing so, several realizations came to mind. Although I have articulated the desire to be distinct from my pastoral models, I am grateful to have evidence of their presence. Mainly related to the black church, black preachers are compelled to find preachers whose sound we desire to emulate. However, this should even more so ring true for pastoral models. When I conceptualized this project, I did so, knowing that no pastorate is the same. In addition to changes in the terroir, there are also changes in the pastor identity-wise as they move from one church to another. It has been helpful in my journey to hear and witness others' experiences on a similar path, and I hope to share in the same. Pastoral ministry can feel isolated; I can recall times where I felt utterly alone while among a crowd of persons following worship service. Some of this is due to the nature of the role. Some of it, I believe, is due to our ability (or inability) to manage our public vs. private personas adequately. Yet, knowing that we are part of a community of "wounded healers" offers a measure of comfort in facing the realities that accompany the role.

The second realization that I experienced finds relatedness to the concept of "pastoral identity and prophetic fire." As stated previously, I affirm that a healthy pastoral model must synthesize the pastor-prophet roles to create a hybrid that retains specific characteristics of both, all the while becoming distinctly unique in its way. I am drawn, in reflection, to the imagery of fire. Fire comes into being due to combustion, a chemical reaction between oxygen, heat, and fuel. While oxygen and heat are relatively static, the fuel source can vary, depending on the context. I cannot help but ponder, what fuels our fire; that is, our passion for performing this good work? What gives us agency and authority to partner with a church and community in hopes of fostering transformation? What fueled Marvin Gaye's compulsion to adjust the trajectory of his music? What fueled Nehemiah's impulse to build? I assert that our fuel source for this pastor-prophet synthesis is found in the ways Christ shows up in our narratives. One of the Black preaching tradition hallmarks is the celebration, frequently found at the conclusion of the sermon. Often referred to as the "sermon close," the celebration moment introduces or brings to the forefront hope for the audience that is derived from the scriptural text. The black preacher may elicit emotion from the congregation by calling out the different superlatives that have been assigned to God over time. It is not uncommon for the congregant to hear the preacher proclaim one or more of the following in rhythmic cadence:

> *Jesus is a battle axe in the time of the battle.*
> *Jesus is shelter in the time of a storm.*
> *Jesus is a doctor who has never lost a patient.*
> *Jesus is a lawyer who never lost a case.*

Now, often the response as the preacher lists the different superlatives is increased energy and excitement amongst the congregation. This is in part due to the anticipation built up by the superlatives listed. Moreso, however, the congregation's celebration is derived from either *faith rewarded*, the experience of Christ functioning as one of those superlatives, or *faith retained*, the expectation that Christ will show up according to their needs. In either case, the proclaimed superlative is verified in the response of the congregation. Christ functions as the perfect pastor-prophet synthesis, for he is firm in his nature yet flexible in adapting to the experiences we encounter. If Christ is the fuel source or passion for the pastor-prophet, the subsequent fire expressed will show such. That evidence cannot be limited to merely preaching about the issues that afflict our churches and communities but participating in meaningful ways. I believe Nehemiah was aware of this, as he chose to participate physically in the building project. He did not linger on rhetoric centered on "what could be"; instead, he decided to struggle alongside the community to foster transformative action. As pastors, the evidence appears in our care and concern for the church and community under our watch. That evidence appears in how we show up and be present for the marginalized and underserved. The evidence is revealed in our efforts to join alongside others as "pilgrim travelers through this barren land."

The final realization yielded by this project is the notion that pastoral identity and prophetic fire are not by any means static entities; they are and must be fluid in the face of a fluid culture. Fluidity permits external forces to manipulate and shape an

object/subject, thus reflecting instability. My observation of both church and pastor per the project suggests that this fluidity complicates how both entities choose to self-identify. Particularly as it relates to the Black church, it calls to mind William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" and how different facets of one's identity are warring with each other to avoid experiences of oppression and discomfort.[129] Du Bois posits "double-consciousness" as it relates to the Black community this way:

> One feels his two-ness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently—that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development. [130]

This double-consciousness shows up in its identity as an organization versus its identity as an organic entity for the church. As an organization or institution, the church has established practices, rituals, ministries, and the like geared towards fostering a sense of

---

[129] Double-consciousness is a concept coined by DuBois in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*, to explain, per Du Bois's own words, "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." For Du Bois, this warring of sorts was between the black person's acknowledgment of their African identity, juxtaposed with their identification as an American. This is not to be confused with Donald Winnicott's concept of "false self vs. true self", which supposes that persons repress aspects of their identity in order to conform, or survive.

[130] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 2.

community amongst the members. In this identity, the church simultaneously embodies and experiences Christ, thus sharing in the body of Christ. The organic identity, I believe, is how the church enacts Christ within the world, beginning with the local community. The church's mandate to evangelize and introduce persons to Christ demands time and resources, which at times may appear to run counter to the church's organizational needs.

Now, if one considers the purpose for the church as determined by Christ, it would not be solely organizational or organic in its identity. The two identities, at times, appear to conflict in many churches; however, I surmise that the reasoning is because they are meant to be synthesized into one coherent identity. Conversely, Doctor Cornel West offers an update of DuBois's theory, asserting that a hybrid of the two warring experiences exists. As described by Doctor Simpson, "Cornel West rightly acknowledges that the African-American experience is non-binary. It is not just the African or the American. It is the creation of a new identity that is neither one nor the other but distinctive hybridity."[131] I assert the same applies to the church, as it relates to its warring identities. The church embodies a pastor-prophet distinction when it understands that ritual and relationship can co-exist. Furthermore, this hybridity reframes how the church defines community as in association with itself; instead of a narrow focus that looks inward, the church broadens its focus, acknowledging that it is "a part of" a larger community, as opposed to "apart from" the community at large. With this new hybrid

[131] Gary V. Simpson, *Message to author*, March 11, 2021.

identity, the church can authentically assume an active role within the community, partnering and participating in its transformation.

Along those lines, the pastor is challenged to embrace this hybrid identity of "pastor-prophet" discussed earlier. The warring of identities in the pastor's case is found in managing the role's expectations from within their church, community, and their own personal psyche. As it pertains to the church, the pastor is expected to function in the myriad of roles that Taylor and Proctor referred to in *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation.* That is a daunting task for one person, let alone one church. Conversely, the expectations of the pastor in the community are to function as a figurehead and proverbial "waymaker" for those who are experiencing a crisis. The demands of these two entities do not consider the pastor's psyche and private identity. Frequently, under the strain of attempting to manage the demands of those mentioned above, pastors sacrifice and suffer in silence. In this fluid context, the pastoral identity benefits all from embodying the "pastor-prophet" synthesis. This synthesis acknowledges the responsibilities of the role in ritual and relationship are to be shared. In sharing, this spreads accountability throughout the congregation, with a perceived by-product of more persons finding passion in the work of the church. This synthesis also allows the pastor to function authentically within the local community. The uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the tensions of racial discrimination and the political climate within the United States, has the community desperate for a presence that is concerned for their well-being and committed to fighting the good fight. However, that presence is

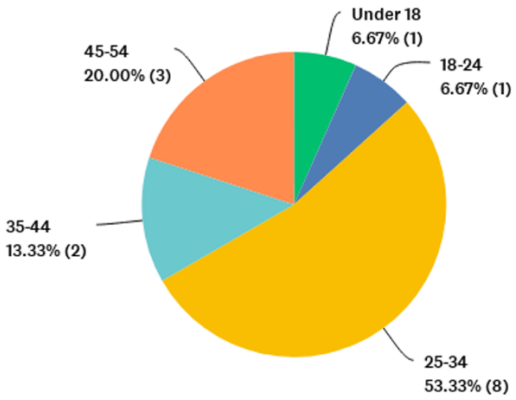
the pastor-prophet; however, since this identity is an identity forged in partnership, the church, the pastor-prophet, church, and community all benefit.

Appendix A

Pastoral Survey

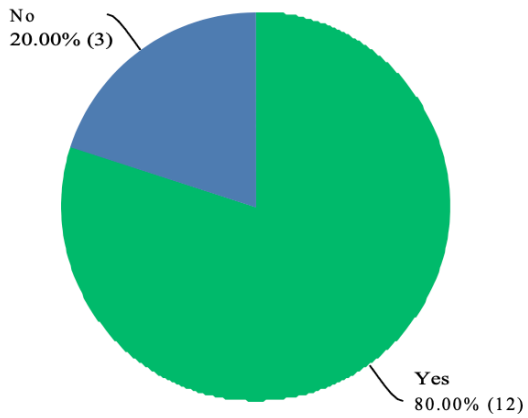
The survey was designed to gauge the experiences of pastors of Black Baptist Churches, using the Survey Monkey platform.

Q1: What age range did you begin your first pastoral assignment?



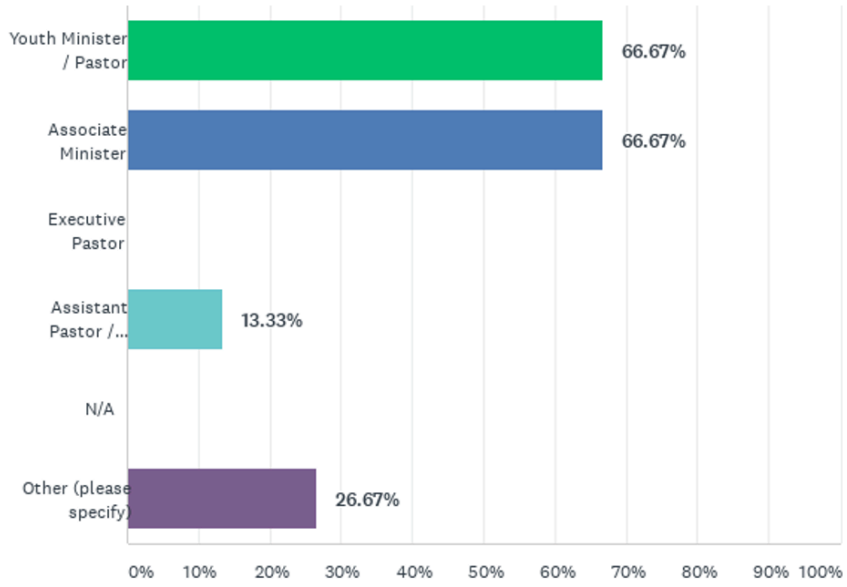
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 18	6.67%	1
18-24	6.67%	1
25-34	53.33%	8
35-44	13.33%	2
45-54	20.00%	3
55-64	0.00%	0
65+	0.00%	0
TOTAL		15

Q2: Did you have prior ministerial experience before your first pastoral assignment? (i.e., associate pastor, assistant / executive pastor, youth pastor)



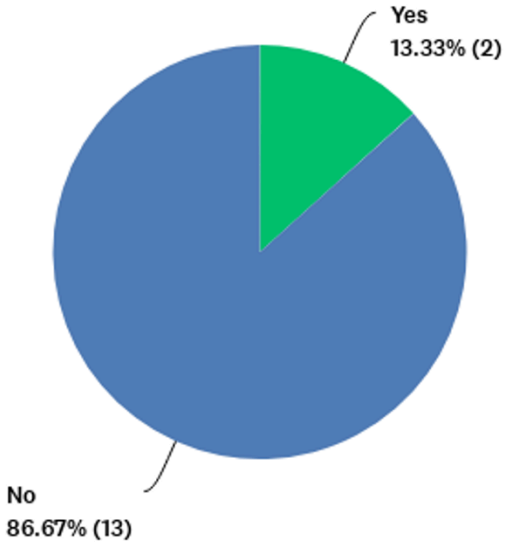
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	80.00%	12
No	20.00%	3
TOTAL		15

Q3: What prior experience(s) did you had prior to your first pastorate?



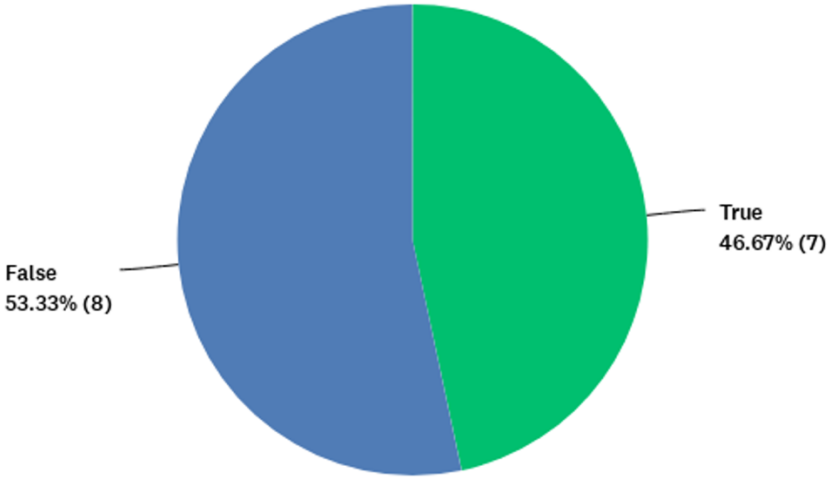
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Youth Minister / Pastor	66.67%	10
Associate Minister	66.67%	10
Executive Pastor	0.00%	0
Assistant Pastor / Assistant to the Pastor	13.33%	2
N/A	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	26.67%	4
Total Respondents: 15		

Q4: Did you have prior experience with the church you were called to pastor? (i.e., preaching, teaching, internship, staff member, community involvement, etc...)



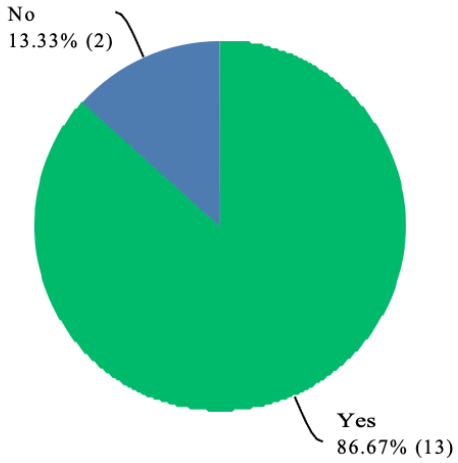
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	13.33%	2
No	86.67%	13
TOTAL		15

Q5 True or False: I felt prepared entering into my first pastorate.



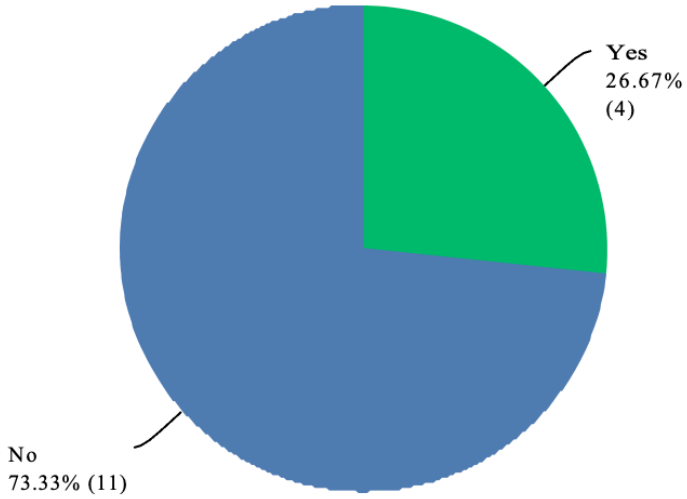
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
True	46.67%	7
False	53.33%	8
TOTAL		15

Q6 Did you have formal theological training prior to beginning your first pastorate? (i.e., seminary, theology school, bible college)



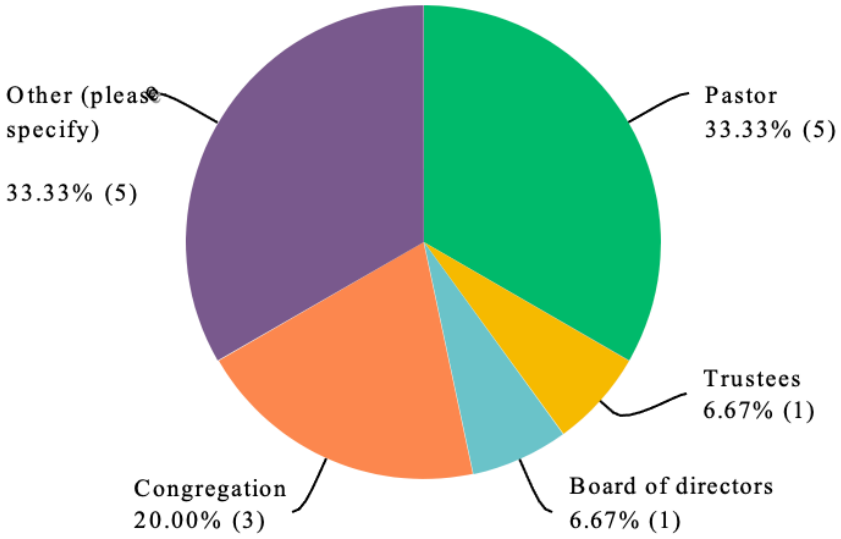
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	86.67%
No	13.33%

Q7 Have you served in leadership in another denomination?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	26.67%
No	73.33%

Q8 Who was the primary decision maker for your congregation?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Pastor	33.33%
Diaconate (deacons)	0.00%
Trustees	6.67%
Board of directors	6.67%
Congregation	20.00%
Other (please specify)	33.33%

Q9: Upon entering your new assignment, what was your strategy for implementing your vision?

#	RESPONSES
1	Simply preach and teach. I did not want to be a micromanager, so I trusted the deacons and trustees to continue managing their responsibilities.
2	Biblical teaching and preaching. I also met with leadership and worked with them to create a strategic plan.
3	Did not have one. Wanted to get to know the people and the culture.
4	Build consensus for shared vision through learning the history and listening to present members.
5	Listen and learn the existing culture. Spend time receiving a vision from God. Assess the needs. Write the vision down. Share with influencers and get buy in. Develop a plan for implementation. Evaluate challenges & celebrate impact.
6	Getting congregational buy in
7	Get to know the community, invest in worship, learn from leaders.
8	Through much prayer and biblical teaching
9	I didn't enter with my personal vision for the church. I started with a desire to get to know the congregation, their strengths, areas for growth and a desire to help them to shape a vision for themselves. In my denomination, pastors come and go. The constant is the congregation. Thus, they need to cast or at least buy into the vision.
10	Consensus building
11	Cast it to the people and get their buy in.
12	Sharing the vision with the leaders and then sharing it with the congregation via a church conference.
13	Learning about systems, recognizing needs and desires for change
14	Biblical authority and persuasion
15	Meeting with the church's leadership first, followed by the congregation. Based upon what they shared were areas of interest, I would compare that to their mission and build from there.

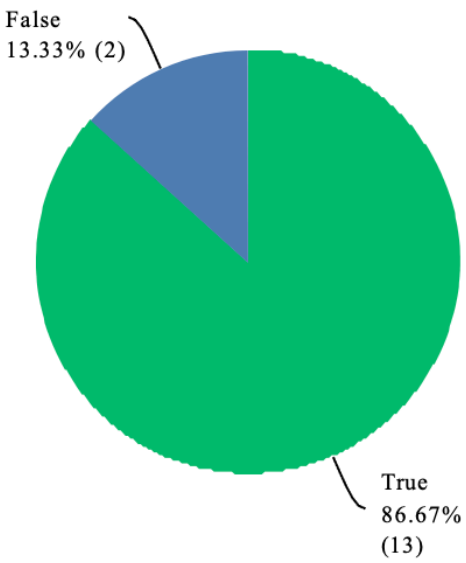
Q10: In your new assignment, how long did it take to implement changes?

#	RESPONSES
1	8 months
2	It's still taking time...lol. I didn't attempt to make changes until after a year.
3	1 year. They were small.
4	Modest changes: 1-3 years; progressive changes: 5-7
5	Some took months and some took years.
6	1 month
7	Some very fast -first week with a bit of backlash.
8	6 months
9	Over a year.
10	A few weeks to a year depending on the scale of the change
11	Some immediately some over time. It just depended on what it was.
12	Instantly due to the church only having 12 members left in it due to a church split with the previous pastor.
13	6 months
14	Six months
15	2 years

Q11: How have you experienced and responded to the presence of resistance during your first pastoral assignment?

#	RESPONSES
1	Those members who did not vote for me made it well known in their treatment. Nothing I did was good enough for them. So, I gave them the opportunity to lead ministry events (they declined).
2	Prayer, and having an open-door policy for members to air their grievances.
3	Head on. It was not the right way to handle it.
4	I left in my third year, and was called back a year later.
5	It has taken a lot of prayer and mentoring from mentors.
6	Prayer, many discussions with leaders
7	One couple sends me nasty emails. For the most part the rest of the church responds well to my leadership.
8	Most definitely
9	By including them in the process and taking time for them to buy into the vision, there was limited resistance.
10	By trying to build some consensus on a compromise
11	Some
12	Deacons didn't want to take heed to my warnings that sought to keep the congregation from making similar mistakes which were detrimental to the spiritual, numerical, and financial health of the church.
13	Challenging/hurtful. Pushback was given with intent at power play from someone on hiring committee when a new hire was under discussion. Ultimatum given.
14	Counseling
15	I planted suggestions amongst members who I knew would speak up and influence others.

Q12: True or False: at times during my first year I questioned whether or not this church and I were compatible.

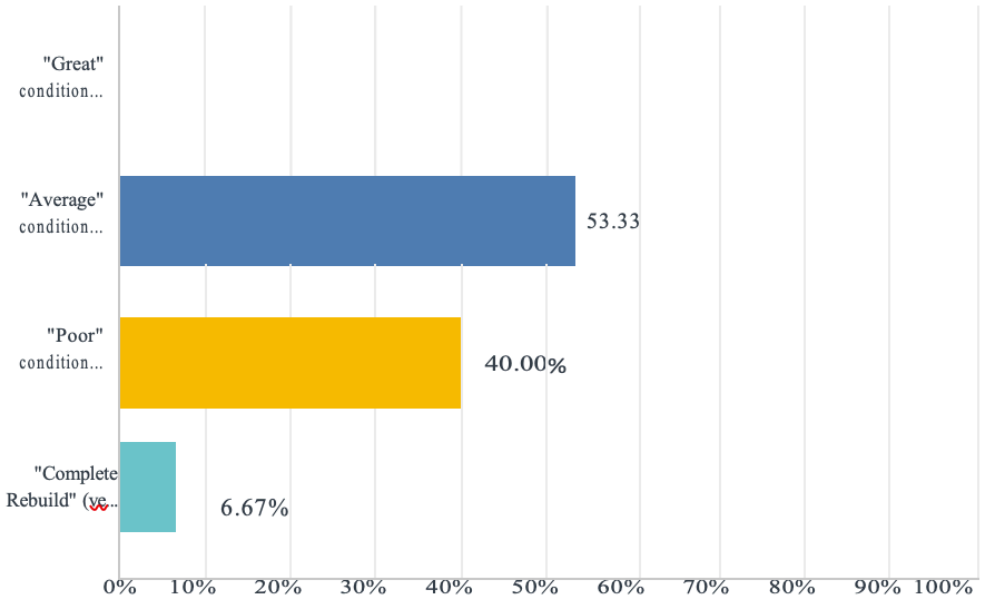


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
True	86.67%
False	13.33%

Q13: How did you manage any frustrations that arose during the first year?

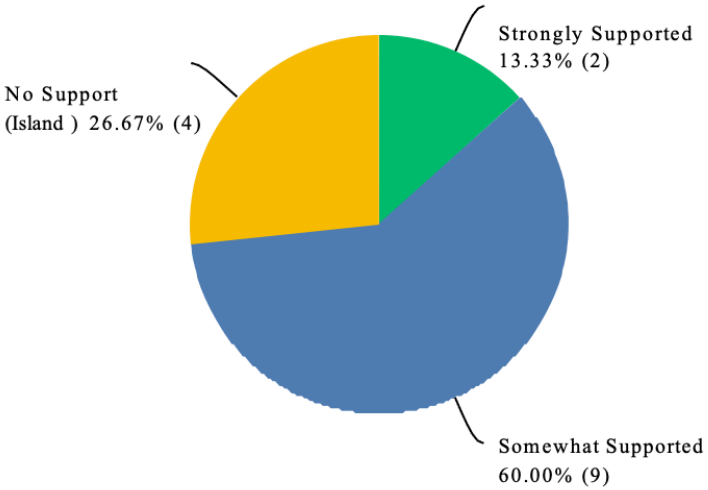
#	RESPONSES
1	Talked with family, some select friends, prayed and exercised
2	I went to therapy. took occasional breaks out of town.
3	Kept it bottled up.
4	Pray, consult colleagues and mentors for guidance.
5	Prayed to God. Talked to mentors. Enrolled in leadership training classes.
6	Prayer, meditation
7	Therapist, friends, mentors
8	By first cooling off and going aside to pray about my frustrations. Later, return to the problem in a better mood with a new attitude in order to use my problems to progress instead of using them to fight.
9	I felt they were part of the process and to be expected. I had a support system that helped me in processing my feelings.
10	Regular spiritual direction and counseling
11	Prayer and patience
12	Prayer and talked with my pastor who was also my mentor in ministry.
13	Relying on support from friends, fellow ministers, therapist, family
14	Prayer and mentor feedback
15	I didn't unfortunately. I had poor coping mechanisms.

Q14: What "condition" did you interpret your first assignment as being?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
"Great" condition (minimal changes needed if any)	0.00%
"Average" condition (sturdy organization, but needs updates in personnel, polity and practices)	53.33%
"Poor" condition (significant organizational changes needed)	40.00%
"Complete Rebuild" (very little salvageable)	6.67%

Q15: Did you feel supported / in community with your congregation, or on an island to yourself?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly Supported	13.33%
Somewhat Supported	60.00%
No Support (Island)	26.67%

Appendix B

Nehemiah Sermon Series

Sermon Title	Corresponding Soundtrack	Scriptural Text
The Cupbearer & the Church	"What's Going On"	Nehemiah 1:11 (c) clause
Inner Conscience Blues	"Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)"	Nehemiah 2:1-8
An Ecology of Engagement	"Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)"	Nehemiah 2:11-18
A Theology of Togetherness	"Right On"	Nehemiah 3
From Escape to Encounter	"Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)"	Nehemiah 4:7-14
A Purposeful Posture	"Save the Children"	Nehemiah 5:1-16
Fingerprints	"Wholy Holy"	Nehemiah 6:15-16

"The Cupbearer and the Church"
Nehemiah 1:11(c clause)
"At the time, I was cupbearer to the king."

In 1970, Motown Records founder Berry Gordy, Jr. received an urgent phone call from Marvin Gaye, one of his most famous artists. The artist was excited about a new album but wanted to share that the title track would be considered a protest song. Gordy, responds “Why do you want to ruin your career? Why do you want to put out a song about the Vietnam War, police brutality, and all of these things? You've got all these great love songs. You're the hottest artist, the sex symbol of the sixties and seventies…”

However, buoyed by the impact of the stories heard from his brother Frankie, a Vietnam veteran, and the condition of Detroit and beyond, Marvin Gaye refuses to record for Motown again until given the green light to record. Eventually, he sidesteps Gordy and gets the title track to the album "What's Goin On' released on January 17, 1971

The song is often misinterpreted as a question; however, it is a definitive statement, a commentary on society's events. In truth, it could be imagined as a modern-day prophetic utterance, with Gaye, the son of a Pentecostal preacher, assuming the role of "mouthpiece" towards the masses.

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today
Father, father
We don't need to escalate

You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today,
Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what's going on

Although this utterance provides a painful portrait of "what is," Gaye invites the hearer to participate in exploring the "what could be" if the audience chooses not to be blind nor silent, towards the things that matter. Interestingly enough, Marvin's portrait is filled primarily with secondhand testimony; after all, his brother Frankie, not he, encountered war-torn Vietnam. However, Marvin realizes that what impacts his brother, what impacts his community, ultimately impacts him.

Situated at the Persian winter palace in Susa, Nehemiah receives some disturbing news. Several men, including his brother Hannai, spoke of the dire conditions impacting the Jews, and their beloved city of Jerusalem, encountered during a trip they made. They indicated the people were facing the duality of traumatic conditions; shame, trouble impacting their internal condition, while their external conditions, the city walls, and gates, were laid in ruins. Nehemiah's response, weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying, likely surprised those around him.

- For you see, while Nehemiah carried a Jewish lineage, he was not born in Judah.
- While Nehemiah had heard of the stories concerning the city and the temple, he had not experienced it for himself.

And yet, his response exudes great emotion and anguish because although he had never encountered the place nor the people, he had a connection. Scripture informs us that he responds four ways:

- Weeps
- Mourns
- Fasts
- Prays

However, it is the last response, in vs. 5-11, that writer emphasizes Nehemiah's prayer. And in this prayer, he does a few things:

- First of all, he acknowledges the ***sovereignty of God***. Sovereignty is defined as supreme Power or authority. Nehemiah does not need a reminder of who God is because he can articulate it. However, Nehemiah says it anyway, to let God know he is aware of who God is. "*O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God...*Nehemiah is likely speaking from experience because he would not be able to authentically say God is a great and awesome God unless God has done something remarkable and excellent in his life
- Secondly, Nehemiah acknowledges the ***sacred relationship*** between God and God's people. Because he continues, "*who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments...".* Nehemiah is aware of the history of this once proud nation whom at one time was the apple in God's eye. He acknowledges that God is that divine parental figure who speaks commands and sets controls to protect the children
- Thirdly, Nehemiah acknowledges the ***shameful situation*** the city is in is more significant than what the people can handle. He goes directly to God because he knows burdens too heavy or vast for humanity's hands are but mere pebbles in the hands of the Almighty

He prays, seeking God's presence to address this situation, and sets a model for you and me in times of trouble. Because if anything else, you and I ought to know how, when, and to whom to pray.

- We ought to know how: to get in a space when we can force out distractions and focus on the Divine
- We ought to know when: to get on bended knee, when trouble is arising, or a situation is out of our hands

- But we ought to know whom: willing, and working on your situation before your situation became a situation, who will allow us to rest during the storm because God is able

But look; my focus is centered on the c clause of the 11th verse: *"At the time, I was cupbearer to the king."* Now, for the sake of context, the cupbearer was a prominent position in the royal court. The cupbearer was responsible for tasting wine before it was served to ensure the one they did, was not poisoned. So they can intervene between life-or-death situations. This image is so poignant for me that in today's climate, God has designated the church to serve as the cupbearer, for the surrounding community. Because, if we are honest with ourselves, the traits and practices of Nehemiah towards the people, we are called to display towards our community. I'm not speaking merely of locational community, although we have a vested stake in the area in which we are physically planted in. Because we will use location as an excuse not to locate the people, we are called to serve. By definition, the community is not merely a group of people living in the same place but also refers to those who share a particular characteristic in common. And for you and me, that common characteristic is that we are all God's children. Now, watch this: if we don't know what the position entails, we can't possibly serve efficiently in it because life is literally in our hands. In like manner, the universal church is in a crucial position by which the community's life and livelihood are literally in our hands.

So Nehemiah, question: "as the church, what should we know about the role we have been called to play?" And here it is. The Cupbearer is ***CHOSEN FOR THEIR***

CHARACTER. The role of cupbearer is a crucial, indispensable position. As such, the king must feel comfortable with whom fills that role. The wine was a staple of most royal diets. That means the intake was frequent. The cupbearer would sample the wine before presenting it to ensure it had not been poisoned. And this did not occur just once, but each time the wine was poured from the container, the cupbearer would partake it to ensure its quality and safety before offering it to the king.

One of the great tragedies of the now is that our communities are sick because they've partaken of poisonous, tainted, spoiled, or cheap wine. The wine was a staple for the king,

- to celebrate with in times of joy
- to console within times of sadness,
- to mellow out within times of stress.

So it was available in times of need. In like manner, the church is obligated to be the spiritual and moral taste tester to ensure that what is provided during these shifting, uncertain seasons of life will help and not harm. Because again, part of the problem we're encountering now is that we've been offered counterfeit wine. And I'm not talking about fermented grapes, but counterfeit wine is

- Large gatherings without social distancing practices because we assume that the pandemic is either a myth or cannot personally impact us
- Ignoring the socio-economic disparity in multiple classes and making legislative decisions that undermine the poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized as "collateral damage" under the guise of "urban renewal."
- Assuming the phrase "Black Lives Matter" is exclusive to and antithetical to all lives matter because it's merely pointing out the disconnect between the words and actions that have existed since day 1.

We know counterfeit wine. We've been offered it, and dare I say, we've been consuming it for some time, not realizing the detriment it causes to our ability to live our best life. But the church, the child of God, has an obligation to offer a product that is not counterfeit. And I'm not talking about growing a vineyard in our backyards, but some things carry the same value we ought to provide.

- An atmosphere of love: we ought to provide
- A mouthpiece for those whose voices have either been minimized, muted, or determined by the status quo not to matter: we ought to provide
- A brave space where folks are not judged for what they are in or came out of but joined together to point them in the right direction. We ought to…

However, it's not enough for the church to be competent because you could be the most extraordinary wine taster in the world but serve no purpose if you are not trusted. This means our character as children of God must be consistent in what God has required of us. Micah reminds us that is to "*do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* And if the community does not experience us in that space, both the community and the church suffer.

So Nehemiah prays. In the prayer, watch this, he acknowledges that he shares the responsibility for Israel's disobedience to God. Nehemiah aligns himself with the people in vs. 6-7 by saying "I confess" (he takes it upon himself) and then says "we" three times. The cupbearer secondly is the **CONDUIT BETWEEN THE PEOPLE AND THE POWER.** Nehemiah acknowledges his privilege. Although he is of Jewish lineage, all he knows concerning Judah is from what he's heard. And he's in a pretty prominent position. But he chooses to utilize who and where he is, not to separate himself further

from the people's trauma but to sit with them and advocate on their behalf. However, he could not authentically do that unless he first acknowledged who they are, where they are, and choose to go there. We as the church can be part of the solution; however, we as the universal church must also admit we are also part of the problem because while we are in the community, we are detached from it. We often state the words of Jesus as we are called to be in the world but not of the world; however, we tend to separate ourselves from the world to the degree we are no longer in the world or the world. The problem with that is two-fold:

- First, we can't reach who we are not willing to touch.
- Secondly, we can't provide what we've been purposed to produce without participating in others' presence.

I remember in college that I needed to get downtown for a conference; I recently changed the battery in my car. I got in the car, already running close to the time I needed to leave to be there on time. When I put the key into the ignition, there was no response from the car. I removed the key, put it back in, and tried again; nothing. At this point, I began to panic because I needed to get to this conference, and my means of getting there was not working. Eventually, I popped the hood, looked under it, and saw that although the battery, the power source was there, it was not connected to the terminal. Or in other words, the conduit that was designed and designated to carry the battery power from the source to the car was disconnected. Did you get it?

I'm through here. But can I tell you what Nehemiah saw? Nehemiah saw:

- Mothers and fathers crying
- Brothers and sisters dying

- Conflicts rising
  And, what he saw, was influenced by not only what he heard but what he felt.

- Nehemiah knew the people needed to be connected to the Power of God.
- Nehemiah knew the people needed a conduit by which to connect them to their creator.
- Nehemiah knew the people needed something capable of connecting Power to the people.

So Nehemiah aligns himself with them so that he would be compatible with them. We're in a unique situation, where we cannot physically gather **safely** in the edifices, we call church. However, for the folks in the back, who want to disregard safety, to sit in their preferred seat in a building, allow me to remind you, the church is not,

- brick and bulletins
- steeples and signs
- pulpit and pews
- functions and fellowship halls

But the church is the body of believers, who came together, as they were

- Bruised
- Battered
- Burdened
- Broken

But in coming as they were, they became bound together, and blood-bought, by a singular act of sacrificial love, courtesy of a sovereign God.

And I may as well remind you that because we came, as we were, bruised, battered, burdened, and broken, something had to happen, that our condition did not consume us. Because for us, the people, to experience transformative Power, we needed to be connected to the power source. And to connect the people to the Power, there has

to be a tried and tested conduit that connects the two. Come here John Rowe; you described it, a little something like this:

I was sinking, deep in sin, far from, the peaceful shore.
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more
But the Master of the seas heard my despairing cry
From the waters, He lifted me, now safe, safe am I.
Because of LOVE! Love, Lifted me!

And that should be, at the heart of, our commitment, to serve as the cupbearer, to the Power and the people, to proclaim in this year of our Lord, "what's going on." For, when we're the cupbearer:

- Secondhand knowledge becomes the firsthand concern
- Love becomes the driving force of all we do
- let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a mighty stream!
- We commit ourselves to get in good trouble
- Despite trials, troubles, trip-ups, and trifling stuff, we find a way to tell the world "What's Going On" and teach the world about loving God.

We don't have to find a way because we know WHO is the way.

Appendix C

Nehemiah Bible Study Series

SYCAMORE HILL
MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

August – September 2020

Wednesdays @ 6:30 PM

Midweek Manna

"What's Goin' On" – Nehemiah and the Modern Day Ekklesia

Rev. James H. Alexander, Senior Pastor

Rev. Jesse Chadwick, Assistant to the Pastor

Overview

This series addresses a significant period in the history of God's chosen people, the Israelites, and their encounters leading into, during, and exiting exile. Using the notable classic album "What's Goin' On" as a soundtrack for the present time, this series will articulate the vision of the church for the "new normal" post-pandemic.

Goals

The goal of this series is 3-fold:

- Identify the timeline of the Israelites from pre through post exile
- Discuss in depth the incidents that prompted the encounters of the people
- To determine implications for the now

Requirements

Prophetic literature is very complex, due to changing context, norms, and cultures that are found therein. As such, to gain a firm grasp of the material, one should be prepared to

- Read provided materials, note questions for discussion
- Draw honest comparisons and contrasts between the children of Israel and the church
- Consider where God is during this period, and how God is at work

Materials

- Holy Bible (Book of Nehemiah)
- Peterson, David L. "Prophetic Literature – An Introduction"
- Collins, John. "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible".
- Gaye, Marvin. "What's Goin On"

Milestones

8/5/2020

Introduction: Understanding Nehemiah

Course of Study

DATE	TOPIC	SCRIPTURE
8/05/2020	Introduction – *"What's Goin' On?"*	Nehemiah 1
8/12/2020	"The Ecology": - Burnt, Broken Pieces	Nehemiah 2:1-9
8/19/2020	*Inner City Blues* -	Nehemiah 2:10 - 20
8/26/2020	*"Contracted Labor – The Builders"*	Nehemiah 3
9/02/2020	*"Overcoming Bullies" Sanballat, Tobiah and Detractors to the Work*	Nehemiah 4:1-6
9/09/2020	*"The Duality of Defense"*	Nehemiah 4:7-16
9/16/2020	*"Honoring the Ties that Bind"*	Nehemiah 5:1-13
9/23/2020	*"Beyond the Enemy's Plot"*	Nehemiah 6
9/30/2020	Summary Recap	

Midweek Manna

"What's Going On": Nehemiah and the Modern Day Ekklesia
August 5, 2020
Nehemiah 1

I. Introduction

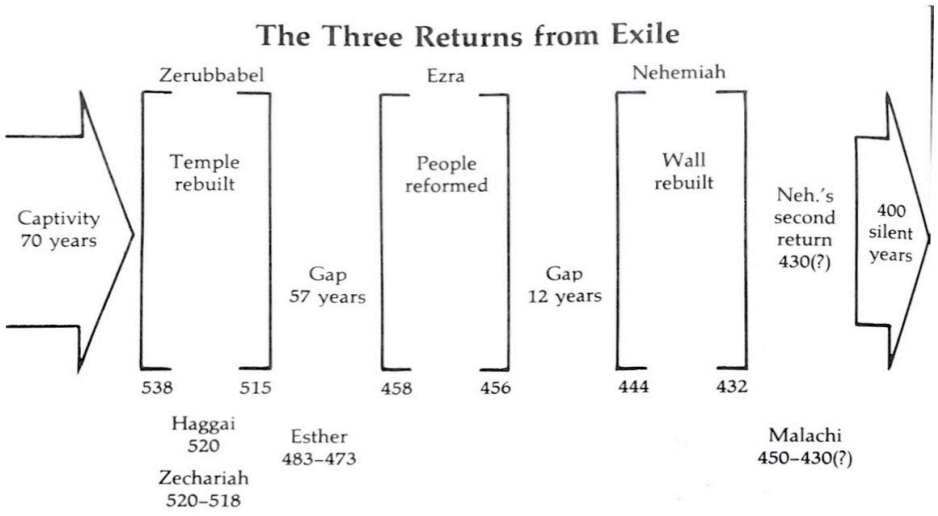
A. February 1969

1. Sycamore Hill's first building (on the corner of First & Greene) was badly burned due to "arson."
2. Eventually, the remnants were razed, cleared as part of "urban renewal" in the community.
3. On August 11th, the Sycamore Hill Gateway Project will be officially dedicated on the site of the original building as a "tribute" to the church and community.
4. What are your memories (if living in the area at the time), or recollections (based upon what was shared by others)?
    -
5. How do suppose the "trauma" of the experience (destruction, displacement) has impacted the church and community?
    -
6. Comparing the community in which the church was located then to our present community now, where do you see the "ruins"? Explain.
    -
7. In exploring the identity of the church from the point of origin to the now, the church's experience (trauma, trial, triumph) can impact how it engages its mission.
    - We have 160 years of history
    - We have a magnificent edifice
    - We have a wealth of members
8. Akin to the clearing of the First & Greene site post destruction / displacement, we have a unique opportunity post pandemic to "rebuild"
    - Something that tells our story in light of HIS story
    - Something that draws significance even in the darkest times
    - Something that offers stability as we are sent forth
9. Qualifiers:
    - Any recounting of history requires accuracy and honesty

- The "rebuilding" I speak of is not "brick and mortar", but bringing community together and birthing transformation
- Not everyone reads / regards our history in the same light
- History not shared is history that does not survive

B. Context – The Land

1. Israel and Judah are both in the throes of captivity & exile
   - Israel: conquered by the Assyrians (722 B.C.)
   - Judah: conquered by the Babylonians (586 B.C.)
2. Both had remnants remain in the land; Israel primarily intermarried into surrounding cultures for sake of survival.
3. Returns to the homeland began to occur around 539 B.C., after the Persians and Medes overtook the Babylonians. The returns occurred in 3 distinct waves:



4. 50,000 of the 2-3,000,000 Jews in exile chose to return; the remainder settled down and created roots in their new land.
5. Nehemiah was of Jewish lineage; however, he was born in Persia.
6. He functions as the cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes, which was a position of great privilege
7. The fact that Nehemiah, as a Jew, is chosen for the position says much concerning his character
8. And that is the point of emphasis on this evening: akin to Nehemiah's character being the catalyst for his ability to spearhead change in Judah, the church must function in the same way; that is, to be the prophetic witness and "*withness*" for the community that God desires.
9. Akin to Marvin Gaye in his song "What's Going On", we are in the space where when we speak / show, people will respond accordingly.

II. THE CHURCH AS PROPHETIC WITNESS / WITHNESS

A. MUST BE ATTUNED TO THE CONDITION OF THE COMMUNITY

1. Vs. 1-3: While serving in Susa, Nehemiah receives reports concerning the condition of Judah from a group of men who traveled there, including his brother Hannai.
2. What stands out to you concerning the exchange?
    -
3. Why was the place (Jerusalem) so important?
    -

4. Vs. 3: "*They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."'*
5. What does "great trouble and disgrace" look like in Greenville in the now?
    -
6. If disgrace is defined as "*loss of reputation or respect as the result of a dishonorable action*", do you believe the perception is solely external, or felt internally by those who are in the community? Why?
    -
7. When viewing the plight of the community in which it is planted, the church cannot be detached from it.
8. In order to be attuned to what is going on, three things must happen:
    - We must have an awareness of who is connected to us (not just location, but also relation)
    - We must ask earnestly the preliminary questions
    - We must care, because the plight is closer to our front door than we care to admit

B. MUST DISPLAY AUTHENTIC CONCERN & CONTRITION

1. Vs. 4a: "*When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven..."*
2. Nehemiah undertakes an emotional process. Why?
    -
3. Can you recall a scenario or experience in which you were not directly involved, but learning of it created an emotional experience?
    -
4. Where do you suppose the emotions originate from?
    -
5. What do you notice concerning his prayer in vs. 5-11?
    -
6. Why do you suppose, again as a secondhand party to the direct event, Nehemiah feels obligated be show contrition?
    -
7. Vs. 8-9: "*Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but*

if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'"

- Nehemiah's contrition and connection are rooted in his realization that regardless of location and socio-economic disparity, he and the people are one and the same. As a Jew, God's promise is inclusive of Him

8. In like manner, God's promises and God's presence are inclusive of all; those outside the margins deserve the same access to God as those inside

C. MUST ACCEPT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SPEARHEADING SOCIAL CHANGE

1. Vs. 11a: *"Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."*
2. Again, Nehemiah was born in Persia; as such, all he knows concerning Judah is what he's been told.
3. Also, he's not a military strategist, nor architect, nor city planner…he is the cupbearer.
4. He likely has no idea what to do, and knows he is limited in what he can do…however, he also knows he has to do SOMETHING.
5. The cupbearer was a prominent position in the kingdom.
   - Frequent access to the king
   - Had to be wise, discreet, trustworthy (meaning he had the king's ear)
6. Not all the responsibility for transforming communities falls on the church.
   - Government
   - School system
   - Social organizations
   - Businesses
   - Families
7. Now, since the responsibility is shared, everyone needs to play a role
8. The church's role may vary, dependent on the need, wherewithal, and resources available; however, the church cannot, under any circumstance, be silent and static
9. We must lead by example, not necessarily in what we're able to do, but with the energy, care and concern by which we engage it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbington, James. *Let Mt. Zion Rejoice! Music in the African American Church.* Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001.

Anyabwile, Thabiti. *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution.* Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015

Barber, Sam. *A Journey to Purchasing and Naming the Brown Hill Cemetery.* Bloomington: Xlibris, 2015

Birch, Bruce C., Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.

Bonfiglio, Ryan. "Priests and Priesthood in the Hebrew Bible." *Oxford Biblical Studies Online,* 2020. http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/priests.xhtml.

Brown Douglas, Kelly. Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999.

Buckhanon Crowder, Stephanie. "Lectionary Commentaries." *The African American Lectionary*. Germantown: The African American Lectionary, 2008. http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=3.

Carruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Carter Jr., Jerry M. *The Audible Sacrament: The Sacramentality of Gardner C. Taylor's Preaching*. PhD dissertation, Drew University, 2007.

Collins, John J. *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

Cone, James Hal. *A Black Theology of Liberation.* Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1970.

—. *God of the Oppressed.* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975.

Coronavirus Overview. *World Health Organization*, 2020. https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1 .

Dempsey, Ron. *Faith Outside the Walls: Why People Don't Come and Why the Church Must Listen.* Macon: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 1997.

Downing, Crystal L. *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* . Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2012.

DuBois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk.* Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903.

Dyson, Michael Eric. *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves, and Demons of Marvin Gaye.* New York: Basic Civas Books, 2004.

East Carolina University. "Brody School of Medicine." East Carolina University, 2020. https://medicine.ecu.edu/about/.

East Carolina University Institutional Planning, Assessment & Research. 2020. *ECU Rankings and Recognition.* Accessed October 13, 2020. https://ipar.ecu.edu/dashboards/dshbd-ranking-recognition/.

Executive Office of the President of the United States. "Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents." *DocumentCloud.org.* National Security Council, 2020. https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6819268/Pandemic-Playbook.pdf.

Franklin, Robert M. *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

Galindo, Israel. *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics.* Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2004.

Gaye, Marvin. "What's Going On," by Renaldo Benson, Al Cleveland, and Marvin Gaye. Recorded June 1970. Track 1 on *What's Going On*, Motown Records, vinyl LP.

Glaude, Eddie. "The Black Church Is Dead." *HuffPost*. The Huffington Post, August 23, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.

Sister Act. Directed by Emile Ardolino. Produced by Buena Vista Pictures. Performed by Whoopi Goldberg, Maggie Smith, Kathy Najimy and Wendy Makkena, 1992.

Greenville, City of. n.d. *Greenville North Carolina.* Accessed October 12, 2020. https://www.greenvillenc.gov/i-want-to/our-city.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century.* New York City: Spiegel & Grau, 2018.

Hjalmarson, Len. "Kingdom Leadership in the Postmodern Era," *Christianity.ca* Accessed December 2, 2020. https://www.christianity.ca/page.aspx?pid=11722.

Houck, Robert. "A History of pandemics in the past 100 years." *Johnson City Press.* July 6, 2020. https://www.johnsoncitypress.com/living/a-history-of-pandemics-in-the-past-100-years/article_2e8b4c2f-dbe2-5c15-b3f2-a52be6925a5c.html.

Housing Authority of the City of Greenville. 1968. "Greenville Urban Renewal Files." *ECU Library.* August 17. Accessed October 12, 2020. http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0674.

Johnson, Ronald W. *From the Outside In: Connecting to the Community Around You.* St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006.

King, Maya. “From Bloody Sunday to Black Lives Matter, the Role of the Black Church Is Shifting.” POLITICO. POLITICO, July 31, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/30/the-role-of-the-black-church-389180.

Lange, Dick G. *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Lincoln, C. Eric. *The Black Church Since Frazier.* New York City: Schocken Books, 1974.

Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

Luther, Martin. “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate.” Essay. In *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes* II, translated by C.M. Jacobs, Vol. II. Philadelphia, PA: A. J. Holman Company, 1915.

Major, Mary, dir. *The Story of a People: The Morehouse Mystique*.1997, Arlington, VA: PBS, 2017, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnUuFU9vZIE.

Maye, Beatrice C. "Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church History." Greenville: Sycamore Hill Missionary Baptist Church, 2020.

Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary.* January 2019. Accessed May 1, 2019. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/.

National Baptist Publishing Board. "Church Covenant." In *The New National Baptist Hymnal*. Nashville: R.H. Boyd Publishing, Inc., 1977.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society.* New York City: Knof Doubleday Publishing Group, 1972.

Parker, Brianna K. *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age.* Dallas: Black Millennial Cafe, LLC, 2018.

Percept Group. 2020. "Ministry Area Profile 2020." *Ministry Area.* January 1. Accessed November 30, 2020. http://www.ministryarea.com/Reports/ReportViewer.aspx?id=ea8381ac-86e8-4420-bccd-338a1a4b75b3 .

Peterson, Eugene H. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.

Peterson, Eugene. *Pastor: A Memoir.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Proctor, Samuel D, and Gardner C Taylor. *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation.* Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996.

Radford, Jeffrey, and Nolan B. Williams. "I Will Trust in the Lord." *African American Heritage Hymnal,* 2001. Edited by Deloris Carpenter. Chicago, Illinois: Gia Publications, September 28.

Red Shark Digital. n.d. *Sycamore Hill Plaza.* Accessed October 15, 2020. https://sycamorehillplaza.com/view-timeline/.

Rev. Ernest Davis Jr. and the Wilmington Chester Mass Choir. *Stand Still (Until His Will Is Clear).* Recorded August 1992, Track 1 on *Stand Still (Until His Will Is Clear),* Atlanta International Records, compact disc.

Roberts, J Deotis. *The Prophethood of All Believers: An African American Political Theology for Ministry.* Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994.

Savage, Carl E., and William Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Approach for Faith Communities.* Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008.

Savage, Stuart. "Arson Suspected in Costly Loss: Old Sycamore Hill Church Burns." *The Daily Reflector.* Greenville: The Daily Reflector, February 13, 1969.

Shelley, Marshall, and Michael Washington. *Preaching When Parched.* Fall 2011. Accessed November 8, 2018. https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2011/fall/whenparched.html.

Smith, Luther. *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship.* Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994.

State of North Carolina. *COVID-19 Orders.* December 8, 2020. Accessed December 8, 2020. https://www.nc.gov/covid-19/covid-19-orders.

Stevens, Marty E. *Leadership Roles in the Old Testament.* Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012.

Swaboda, A.J. *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018.

Sweet, Leonard. *FaithQuakes.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

—. *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* . New York City, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.

—. *So Beautiful.* Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith.* San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007.

UCLAHealth. "7 Steps to Reduce Pandemic Fatigue." https://connect.uclahealth.org/, July 7, 2020. https://connect.uclahealth.org/2020/07/07/7-steps-to-reduce-pandemic-fatigue/.

"United States Census Bureau QuickFacts: Roxbury Township, New Jersey. Census Bureau QuickFacts. United States Department of Commerce, 2018. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/roxburytownshipmorriscountynewjersey.

"U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Newnan City, Georgia." Census Bureau QuickFacts. United States Department of Commerce, 2018. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/newnancitygeorgia.

Warnock, Raphael G. . *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

Watkins, Ralph C. *Leading Your African American Church through Pastoral Transition.* Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2010.

Wesley, Charles. "A Charge to Keep I Have." *The New National Baptist Hymnal.* Nashville: R.H. Boyd Publishing, Inc., 1977.

Williams, William. "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." *The New National Baptist Hymnal.* Nashville: R.H. Boyd Publishing, Inc., 1977.

Williamson, H.G.M. *Ezra and Nehemiah.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987.

Wimberly, Anne E. Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education.* Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Wimberly, Edward P. *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Winters, Orlando K. *Pastoral Burnout In the Black Church In the New Era State Baptist Convention.* Ashland: Ashland Theological Seminary, 2009.

Zion Hill Baptist Church. "The History of Zion Hill Baptist Church." Newnan: Zion Hill Baptist Church, 2018. http://www.zhbcnewnan.org.