

THE EIGHT WEEK WOMANIST WORKSHOP:
CAN WOMANIST THEOLOGY BE A SOURCE OF LIBERATION FOR BLACK
CHURCHWOMEN?

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ABSTRACT

THE EIGHT WEEK WOMANIST WORKSHOP: CAN WOMANIST THEOLOGY BE A SOURCE OF LIBERATION FOR BLACK CHURCHWOMEN?

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Womanist theology transforms the identities and leadership of Black women who have engaged with it during their theological education. In “The Eight Week Womanist Workshop: Can Womanist Theology be a Source of Liberation for Black Churchwomen,” Alexis Carter Thomas argues that creating space for critical contextual engagement and womanist theological discourse can change the mindsets of Black churchwomen in regards to their theological perspectives about God, themselves, and the heteropatriarchal leadership and culture of Black churches. The author provides a brief history of womanist theology and the position of African American women in the United States. Womanist theology is presented as counter-hegemonic to patriarchal hegemonic Black church culture. This paper examines The 8-Week Womanist Workshop - a focus group exploring how inviting Black churchwomen to engage with womanist theology may change their minds about the traditions and harms of patriarchal hegemonic Black church culture.

The paper proposes that womanist theology provides liberating concepts, biblical interpretation, and ways of being that have the power to reform, liberate and increase the well-being of Black churchwomen. The 8-Week Womanist Workshop reveals that Black churchwomen’s minds can be changed by engaging with womanist theology in a small group format. It is especially important that those who have not had formal theological

training are given more time, space, and facilitated discussions to explore key ideas within the area of study.

Monica Coleman's discussion of creative transformation and postmodern womanist theology is used to demonstrate how womanist theology invites Black churchwomen to witness God opening up new possibilities, to make radical moves that confront the status quo, prioritize justice, and pursue wholeness as a quality of life. Through this research, the idea of co-creative transformation emerges as a necessary framework to introduce womanist theology in ecclesial spaces. This involves envisioning Christ as a central, yet expansive, figure encouraging participants to engage with a postmodern and pluralistic world that is hindered by Black church patriarchal cultural hegemony. The paper concludes with a suggestion to improve the 8-Week Womanist Workshop through a four-part process of co-creative transformation: engagement, exploration, consideration, and action.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Historical Harms of Patriarchal Cultural Hegemony	15
Chapter Two: Why Womanist Theology?	24
Chapter Three: The 8-Week Womanist Workshop as a Focus Group.....	39
Chapter Four: The Results of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop	46
Chapter Five: A Framework for Womanist Theological Formation	70
Chapter Six: Healing and Teaching as Creative Transformation	76
Chapter Seven: A Move Towards Co-Creative Transformation	87
Chapter Eight: The Conclusion.....	97
Bibliography	105

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INTRODUCTION

Since I was a little girl, I have identified classrooms with joy and powerful possibilities - as spaces of formation, friendship, and future-making. The earliest of my memory had laminate wooden desks, colorful wall art, and cozy reading nooks with circular rugs framed by bookshelves. As I grew older, I was delighted by the power of knowledge and history. I heard stories about hardship and hope that captivated me while I sat in my grandparents' living room and in church.

I first learned about the depth of *womanist theology* when I was well into my thirties. I read books and attended conferences where Black women scholars spoke of its impact on their lives. I found myself encompassed by womanist scholars who taught me to truly *love*—myself, freedom in Christ, Black women, the color purple, and the beauty of the moon. The words of womanist scholars have changed me. They gave me keys to liberating edifices that I did not know existed— blueprints that mapped paths to freedom. In the midst of dense academic rhetoric, I heard a call. A call to come home to myself.

Awakened to new womanist perspectives, I became hyperaware of various challenges and oppressions within Black churches. One particular issue that stood out to me was the preference for the preaching and leadership of men, and the exclusion and inferiority of women. I yearned to introduce the women I loved to the scholars who had loved me into myself. I wondered if the freedom that seemed distant and inaccessible could draw Black churchwomen close and towards curiosity. A kind of freedom that could rescue them from that which sought to diminish their divinity or indoctrinate them with the lie that they were made for anything less than the life-giving abundance kind of

life. My desire to share the womanist gospel of liberation led me to pursue a Doctor of Ministry, focusing my work on how to help Black churchwomen dismantle the heteropatriarchal cultural hegemony within Black churches.

Being formed and loved by Black churchwomen has transformed my perspective on theological education. Through my doctoral work, I have dreamed of taking some of the readings and lessons that I have learned in classrooms and translating them to the kind of God-talk that happens on couches and around the dinner table. My education has birthed a desire to create collaborative learning spaces which center Christ and Black women. I want to create spaces where Black women can own the fullness of our divinity and humanity. Where songs of praise and anger can arise and coexist. Where we can study the powerful words and stories of womanist scholars and sisters on the journey. Where we will sip on their sentiments, savor the God-talk, and satisfy our souls with God's delight in Black women as we share tools for repair, restoration, and empowerment.

On Sunday mornings in the church of my childhood, during testimony time, Sister Irolla Mallory would shout in tenor, "I ain't tellin' you what I heard, I'm tellin' you what I know!" So, in the tradition of Sister Irolla, I come to testify and tell you what I know. I share the voices of those who have much to shout about what they know because their voices have been hushed for so long. Who will shout what they know - not just through classroom learning but through livin'. That which they *know* in their bones and their belly. That which they can't unknow. I will invite them into spaces where they can be comfortable considering new things, but also where they can share what they already know. Spaces where both learning and experience are equally important.

What would happen if more Black women had spaces where they could stand during the tough and tearful times and shout what they know? To claim the truths which can set many free. This work has been an effort to create more spaces for Black churchwomen to know liberation through engaging with ideas that can change their minds. May they grab hold of the words, stories, and questions that can free them to live fully and authentically within and beyond the heteropatriarchal cultural hegemonic walls of Black churches.

This research examines the factors that draw Black churchwomen away from the snares of the patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony and towards the kind of liberation that allows them to prioritize truth, authenticity, and wellness. The paper describes how Antonio Gramsci's idea of *counter-hegemony* can be used to achieve these ends. Black churchwomen are often unaware of the extent to which Black church spaces are destructive to them, inhibiting their wholeness and agency within their communities. This research will argue that creating space for critical contextual engagement and womanist theological discourse can change the mindsets of Black churchwomen in regards to their theological perspectives about God, themselves, and the heteropatriarchal leadership and culture of Black churches. Furthermore, I hope that this work will lead to an active process of confronting and dismantling harmful patriarchal hegemony within the Black church.

A few of my key terms require definitions because I use these terms in nuanced ways. When using the term "womanist," I refer to the ideological centering of Black women's lives with an emphasis on how matters of race, class, and gender shape their experiences. I use the term "Black women" to reference women of African descent.

“Black churchwomen” is a term I use to specifically refer to African American women whose faith and spirituality have been shaped by the traditions of Christianity within antebellum slave communities and West African cultures.¹ The phrase “Black churchwomen” denotes African American women who have been formed by Black church traditions and find their spiritual home in these spaces (across various denominations). I frequently use the terms “hegemony” or “hegemonic” to speak about the patriarchal leadership that governs many Black churches and is upheld by religious and cultural ideals—both terms are further explicated in the first chapter.

Overview

Within this paper, I will use the words of various womanist and black feminist scholars, Black churchwomen, and other writers to explore the kind of conversations and materials Black churchwomen need to engage with to change their minds about heteropatriarchal Black church cultural hegemony. The paper begins with a “Statement of the Problem” that names the trends and needs that have prompted this research. This is followed by the “Purpose of the Study” which expresses an overview of the aims and acknowledges the limitations of the study. The subsequent content of this introduction provides a brief outline of each chapter of the paper.

The first chapter, “The Harms of Patriarchal Cultural Hegemony,” is an exploration of the systemic evils which negatively affect Black women because of their

¹ Katie G. Cannon writes, “The Black Church came into existence as an invisible institution in the slave community during the seventeenth century. Hidden from the eyes of the slavemasters, Black women and men developed an extensive religious life of their own. Utilizing West African religious concepts in a new and totally different context and syncretistically blending them with orthodox, colonial Christianity, the slaves made Christianity truly their own.” Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988), 17-20.

race, class, and gender. The paper then moves to explain how womanist theology can be a panacea to these societal ills. In Chapter Two, “Why Womanist Theology?,” an explanation of the aims and a brief overview of the contributions of womanist scholars and womanist theology are given to illuminate how it can be a solution to the harms named in the previous chapter. Chapter Three, “What is a Womanist Methodology?,” describes the methods and approach of the research.

Moving to Chapter Four, “The 8-Week Womanist Workshop,” I describe the objectives and format of my research which involves convening a focus group of six Black churchwomen to explore what happens when they are introduced to womanist theology. I selected discussion topics and weekly readings to engage with women around their stories and what might womanist theology offer them. This chapter details the intentions and content of the eight focus group sessions.

The outcomes and reflections of the study are detailed in Chapter Five: “The Results of The 8-Week-Womanist Workshop.” The sections within this chapter are divided by the themes that arose during the research study. I use excerpts from Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness*² and Renita Weems’ *Just a Sister Away*³ to provide examples of womanist biblical interpretation. Wilda Gafney’s *Womanist Midrash*⁴ is used to provide practical explanations of what it can look like to engage in womanist biblical interpretation. Gafney’s questions demonstrate what it means to read the biblical text

² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: OrbisBooks), 1993.

³ Renita J. Weems, *Just A Sister Away: Understanding Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible* (New York, NY: Warner Books Edition), 2005.

⁴ Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and The Throne*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2017.

with an imagination that welcomes readers' social locations and an awareness of marginalized people groups. Narratives from Yolanda Pierce's *In My Grandmother's House*⁵ are used to reiterate what it means to center Black women's experiences and to critically engage with the Black churches and traditions that many love. *Sexuality and The Black Church*⁶ by Kelly Brown Douglas is engaged as a basis of discussions on how white supremacy has framed the way many Black churches think and speak about sexuality.

Monica Coleman's discussion of process and postmodern womanist theologies within *Making a Way Out of No Way*⁷ are used to build the framework for the research focus group. My research is committed to the womanist notion of "making a way out of no way."⁸ Chapters Six and Seven examine how my research employs Coleman's work and lens in considering factors that might bring a woman to challenge heteropatriarchal Black church cultural hegemony. In Chapter Six, "Creative Transformation: Build a Framework for Womanist Theological Formation," I discuss Coleman's assessment of John B. Cobb's work on *creative transformation* and how it corresponds to the framework that I provide for a focus group that centers womanist theological formation. In Chapter Seven, "Creative Transformation and Postmodern Womanist Theology:

⁵ Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit*, (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books), 2021.

⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality And The Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1999.

⁷ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: a womanist theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

⁸ Monica Coleman writes that, "'Making a way out of no way' is a summarizing concept for black women's experiences of struggle and God's assistance in helping them overcome oppression." *Ibid.*, 12.

Healing and Teaching,” I move to discuss how postmodern womanist theology is a means of liberation for Black churchwomen.

In the final chapter, I suggest a new way forward: *co-creative-transformation*. I envision co-creative-transformation as a way for Black churchwomen to engage with the liberating work of womanist theological scholarship without compromising their deeply held theological foundations. This chapter is a response to the wrestlings of women who have wondered, *how can I hold onto Jesus and embrace womanist theology?* I suggest that certain aspects of Walker’s four-part definition and womanist theology may bear more significance for many Black churchwomen over time. I offer a four step co-creative transformation that is meant to confront the rigid readings of Jesus and myopic theologies that Black churches espouse that are in conflict with womanist theology which prevent Black churchwomen from embracing it.

My conclusion revisits the statement of the problem and research question and presents an outline of an introductory womanist resource for Black churchwomen. In this section, I assert the need to incorporate voices beyond the academic canon of womanist scholarship for Black churchwomen to consider in their theological reformation. The work that I envision involves the cultivation of a communal space for womanist theological formation and exploration, with the goals of opening eyes, changing minds, and producing action that challenges the patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony that does harm to Black churchwomen and their wider communities.

Statement of the Problem

Due to a long history of cruel mistreatment, violence, and *de jure* segregation, Black women in the United States have been exploited and prevented from educational

opportunities and jobs that have significantly obstructed them from equitable access to social and economic advancement today.⁹ The ramifications of decades of subjugation continue in the form of pay inequity, economic disparity, and gender discrimination.¹⁰ For example, over fifty percent of Black women who are employed are in jobs that pay them a minimum wage.¹¹ In a nation where Black women’s bodies and contributions are undervalued or dismissed by the dominant culture, this research invites an exploration into how Black churches can provide a means for healing and tools for transformation.

What impact does church attendance have on Black women who work hard during the week and are expected to give more of themselves on Sundays? Womanist theologian Yolanda Pierce writes about the characteristics of Black churchwomen: “We pray more, give more, and serve more. We open the doors of the church, clean the bathrooms, and then close the doors of the church. With membership on average eighty-five percent female, black churches across the nation rely on our tithes and offerings to literally keep the lights on.”¹² Research shows that Black women are not only being overlooked in their congregations but that they are also exhausted from being overworked.¹³ These churches often become another workplace that misunderstands and

⁹ American Association of University Women, “Systemic Racism and the Gender Pay Gap: A Supplement to The Simple Truth,” PDF File, 2021, https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/2021/07/SimpleTruth_4.0-1.pdf, 2-3. The study shows that today’s economic gaps experienced by Black women have resulted from slavery and laws enacted that narrowed their employment opportunities—while allowing white women to advance professionally and economically.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

¹¹ Camille Lloyd, “Black Women in the Workplace,” Gallup, March 15, 2021, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/333194/black-women-workplace.aspx>.

¹² Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit*, (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), chap. 6, Christian Audio.

¹³ In “They Have Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival,” I write about

misuses Black women's bodies by masquerading their capitalistic ventures as "the work of the Lord." The values and practices of heteropatriarchal hegemonic spaces often marked by gender roles and toxic masculinity (even in churches that claim to be progressive) are destructive to the minds, bodies, and spirits of Black churchwomen. This occurs when Black churchwomen are encouraged to serve in subservient and laborious roles without pay and proper support. They are restricted to certain biblical interpretations and excluded from real authority within the congregation.

This paper seeks to respond to this problem by supporting Black churchwomen through providing them with the knowledge, tools, and womanist theological resources that can lead to them changing their minds about hegemonic Black church practices.¹⁴ Oftentimes, liberating mentorship and theological education are not encouraged for women in these settings because women's empowerment does not benefit the patriarchy and would in fact dismantle the system that Black women are needed to uphold.¹⁵ What would the state of Black churches become if churchwomen who labor and lead within their local congregations came to see their roles, authority, and biblical interpretations as

the roadblocks to flourishing for Black clergywomen, and overwork was shown to contribute to their experiences of burnout and physical illness. Alexis Carter Thomas, "They Have Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival," *PHILLIS: Moving to the Other Side of the Mountain: Black Women's Resolve in a Moment of Crisis*. Vol. 6, Issue 1, (2021-2022): 63.

¹⁴ Emilie Townes writes, "...womanist theology must work with church women to affirm their power, to help empower those who need it, and to encourage the articulation of Black women's voices and theological perspectives in the leadership of the Black Church so that the church might grow and change to be more inclusive and responsive." Emilie Townes, "Womanist Theology," *Encyclopedia for Women and Religion in America*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 169.

¹⁵ Delores Williams writes, "Through their uncritical use of the Bible and through their patriarchal theology, many of the African-American denominational churches prohibit black women from asking many critical questions about women's oppression and about the support and reinforcement of that oppression by the Bible and by the Christian church in all its male-dominated forms." Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), xvii.

possibilities for liberation? Black church membership is overwhelmingly made up of Black women, but do these churches have anything to offer those who love deeply and labor faithfully? If the spaces where women are expected to tithe, shout, and work could become the places where they also lead, preach, and make decisions, it could change the way that Black women navigate spaces where their bodies and contributions are devalued.

The Bible is a primary tool that is used to shape the images of how Black churchwomen see themselves and their God. For Black churchwomen who encounter womanist theology for the first time, it may seem that the Bible's authority is being diminished, when it actually provides a challenge to view and read it in its proper context.¹⁶ The Bible was written without knowledge of the traditions, situations, and struggles of Black churchwomen in the United States in the twenty-first century. These texts emerged in a patriarchal context and provide commentary on religion from a patriarchal purview. Because of these realities, those who are being invited to question the cultural hegemonic structures and practices that have formed them must embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion.¹⁷ Womanist theology brings with it new ways of viewing bodies, gender, and value and involves reconsidering what God says about these. It also

¹⁶ Mitzi Smith writes, "The Bible as a sacred text can be a source of power, a powerful tool, and vehicle of God's transformative, redemptive, prophetic revelation. But the Bible is not the Power. God and the Bible are not synonymous." "This Little Light of Mine," *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 115.

¹⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas, "This hermeneutic should reflect the preferred perspective and preferential moral agency of the underside. Inasmuch as any text or interpretation of a text diminishes the life and freedom of any people, then those texts and/or interpretations must be held under "suspicion," critically reevaluated and perhaps lose authority." Kelly Brown Douglas, "Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation," *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 86.

introduces perspectives that challenge the system that overworks and undervalues Black women. The ways that scripture is and can be interpreted in Black church spaces to perpetuate white supremacy and heteropatriarchal hegemony are exposed when Black women learn to interrogate scripture and the systems in which they are interpreted. Womanist biblical interpretation entails paying attention to “the overarching hermeneutic of liberty and justice for the oppressed and most marginalized.”¹⁸ This study encourages women to do this kind of work—to read, pray, discuss, and deconstruct together.

It is worth noting that I did not give space to a substantial amount of scripture in this work. Why? Black churchwomen often know scripture well. It is not that they do not know how to exegete scripture, it is that they have been limited to interpreting through a particular lens. Black churchwomen need access to more and different perspectives and the freedom to ask questions that have long been forbidden. Black churchwomen are ready for the good news that Jesus can save their souls without enslaving their minds, bodies, and spirits.

Another question posed in the pages that follow is, *how can Black churches offer good news for Black women?* When churches fail to offer this good news, how can Black women recognize and confront its absence while seeking out spaces of well-being and wholeness? Answering this question requires reconsidering traditions, mindsets, and practices that allow the subjugation of Black women. Throughout this study, I became more curious about what needs to happen for Black churchwomen to counter the hegemonic practices that are destructive to them. The study conducted shows that Black women feel Jesus has good news for everyone, but their congregations have good news

¹⁸ Mitzi J. Smith, “This Little Light of Mine,” 116.

that is preferential to Black men. If Black churches refuse to question the exhaustion and inequity of Black women, then they are not able to do the work of liberation, because they do not question the values of the dominant culture. I suggest womanist theology as a corrective to the dismissal and devaluing of Black churchwomen and a pathway to their empowerment and liberation inside and outside of churches.

The problems presented by overwork and patriarchal biblical interpretation, as well as the lack of good news that Black churches offer Black churchwomen, are factors that led to this study. These concepts will be further explained in the first chapter. Through my research, I aimed to explore the questions posed and reasonings for introducing womanist theology to Black churchwomen with the hope that they might change their minds about God, themselves, and the heteropatriarchal leadership and culture of Black churches. Now that I have discussed the problems that have led to my interest in providing more support for Black churchwomen, I will describe the purpose of this study and the specific aims that I set out to achieve.

Purpose of the Study

This section will explain the key purposes and limitations of my research. The purpose of the study is to gain a clearer understanding of what factors cause Black churchwomen to change their minds from acquiescence to heteropatriarchal Black church cultural hegemony towards womanist ways of reading scripture and examining their contexts. The four central aims of this research study are to:

1. Examine the needs and interests of Black churchwomen in congregational leadership.
2. Cultivate a space for connection, theological study, and critical engagement with womanist thought.

3. Stimulate thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts through a womanist lens and womanist hermeneutics.
4. Develop a resource that encourages the study of, and theological formation through, womanist theology for Black churchwomen.

By engaging in conversation with womanist literature and a focus group of Black women congregational leaders, this qualitative research study illuminates and identifies critical components for a theological study and formation process. The process section describes the impact of womanist theological formation on a focus group that will explore how a woman may change her mind through exploring her needs and interests as a ministerial leader, engaging with womanist thought, and reflecting on theology through a womanist lens. An accomplished aim of the research was that by engaging in this process, participants would expand their views of their calling, context, and possibilities for flourishing beyond the limited offerings of hegemonic Black churches. An unintended consequence of the study was that participants expanded their resource libraries, reading works by Black women writers and following Black creators on social media. A foreseeable long-term consequence is to equip participants to take critical steps towards confronting, dismantling, and/or abstaining from hegemonic heteropatriarchal practices within their contexts.

In regard to the limitations of this research, there are several aspects worth noting here. I worked with a very small sample of human subjects which may have led to generalizations that are broader than ideal. The research demographic is not comprehensive enough to cover several denominations or regions within the United States. There may be a need for more interviews in order to substantiate the data that emerges from the focus group. Another limitation is my own experience; although I have theological training and experience facilitating groups, I am not a skilled theologian or

biblical scholar. Through being in conversation with those who are – including womanist theologians, my faculty advisor, and my faculty mentor – I anticipated conducting effective qualitative research that meets my objectives and demonstrates measurable and replicable results. It is important to name that I am doing this work for the Black women in the pews and pulpits—not primarily for those in the academy. Those in the pews and pulpits will be my conversation partners, but this research is important because there has been little attention given to conveying and translating the work of womanist theology for people in the pews. Therefore, my work endeavors to take the intellectual and spiritual ideas of womanist theology to produce didactics that introduce the scholarship, excavate the stories in the room, and provide space for communal wrestling and celebration. The hope is that this work will be a bridge across the chasm of womanist scholarship and the praxis of it for Black churchwomen. Through this research, I create space for critical contextual engagement and womanist theological discourse that stir Black women to identify and change their minds about the Black church traditions and structures that do them harm. In order to further recognize the purpose of this study, there must be a deeper understanding of the historical need for and significance of it, which is provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL HARMS OF PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Not long after I joined the pastoral staff of a church, a team member approached me and told me that our senior pastor's wife was uncomfortable that I chose to sit in the chair next to the one where her husband sat in the pulpit—it caused congregants to think that I was the pastor's wife. After that, I was hyper-aware of my presence as the only single woman on the pastoral staff and resolved to sit in the pulpit's second row for the next five years. *Instead of avoiding the assumption, why did we not work to dismantle it? Why could we not teach people that a woman who is in power and next in line to the pastor does not have to be his wife.*

-Alexis Carter Thomas¹

In order to better understand the current state of many Black churchwomen, there must be an examination of the historic state of Black women who were brought to the land now known as the United States of America. African peoples were forced from their homelands, sold, violated, and exploited all for the sake of the capitalistic ventures of a white society. These humans with rich lives—vocations, marriages, sacred rituals, favorite meals, and family gatherings—were dehumanized and forced to live as property. They lost rights to themselves and their children. Whether working in fields or as domestic labor, Black women's bodies were exploited for the production of cash crops and new generations of enslaved persons. Katie Cannon writes, "As 'work-ox' the Black woman was subjected to hard, steady, often strenuous labor. From sunup to sundown she either worked alongside the men in the cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugarcane fields or catered as a domestic, from before dawn to late at night, to the demands made by the mistress and

¹ Alexis Carter Thomas, "They Have Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival," 73-74.

other members of the master's family."² This exploitation of Black women did not end when chattel slavery was abolished—the legacy of cruelty endures, and Black bodies remember. Intentional deconstruction, theological thoughtfulness, and a willingness to break from toxic traditions are required to interrupt systems of white-supremacist-heteropatriarchal-capitalist hegemony which keep Black women at the bottom of hierarchies which demean them to their profit or production value. This chapter examines the historical harms of heteropatriarchal Black Church cultural hegemony and points to womanist theology as a counter-hegemonic corrective for the liberation of Black women.

During the antebellum and post-Civil War periods, Black church became the space in which Black people had power and subverted the dominant power that worked to diminish their minds, bodies, and cultures.³ When I use the phrase “Black church” in this paper, I am referring to the liberative organizing of worshippers and followers of a radicalized Jesus that sought to resist oppression from its birth in the antebellum period.⁴ I acknowledge that the idea of the Black church escapes precise definition because it is not monolithic, and it is made up of diverse individuals influenced by denominations and regional locations. The Black church is an institution that is marked and sustained by the ministry and care of Black women. It is not defined by creeds, doctrines, or denominations. I have named how Black women were used and abused as “work-oxes” on plantations. Now I assert that the legacy of the exploitation of Black women's labor continues in ways that have been sanitized and repurposed “for the good” of Black

² Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 17-20.

⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 181-194.

churches. Thus, this institution that was meant to empower Black people and subvert the white patriarchy has become an asset for Black heteropatriarchal leadership.

Within Black churches, men have mirrored white slave masters in the sense of devaluing Black women for personal profit and power.⁵ Black churchwomen are rarely seen leading, making decisions, and being esteemed beyond what they produce. On average, Black women make up seventy-seven percent of Black church attendees,⁶ but only sixteen percent of churches have women as congregational leaders.⁷ It matters that a majority of Black churches are pastored by men [and few have had women pastors]. It is highly problematic that over half of the members of these churches have not regularly experienced senior pastoral leadership and preaching from someone who shares their gender. Churches have used scripture to force women to accept a second-class status that results in subordination and exclusion.⁸ These churches want the labor and contributions of women which benefit the men in power without proper acknowledgement or support for the women doing the work. The ministries of thriving Black preachers and pastors are

⁵ “During slavery and the post-bellum period in America, black women were objectified by white male slave masters and their wives, just as Hagar was objectified by Abraham and Sarah. Moreover, black women are oppressed and exploited by black men, particularly within black church contexts.” Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 24.

⁶ Sandra L. Barnes, “Whosoever will let her come: Social activism and gender inclusivity in the Black Church,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, Issue 3 (September 2006): 373, doi: 10.1111/J.1468-5906.2006.00312.X.

⁷ David Crary, “Survey: Black Americans attend church and pray more often,” *AP News*, February 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/black-americans-attend-church-pray-more-be5b10abc863c0975c11a92a488e67a3>.

⁸ Scriptures most referenced are gross misreadings of words contained in epistles written by the Apostle Paul and those that are attributed to him, but likely pseudepigraphic. These words were written to first-century churches and persons who expressed specific concerns and desired for their contextual issues to be addressed. Yet, they are used to bar women from pastoral leadership, preaching, teaching, and flourishing to their full capacities. Examples include: 1Corinthians 14:34-35; Ephesians 5:22–27; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; and Titus 2:3-5.

often built on the backs of churchwomen who gave of themselves through generous giving of their personal resources and fundraising. In the twenty-first century Black church, the “hard, steady, and often strenuous labor” of Cannon’s description manifests as planning church programs, ensuring that the church and its leaders have ample resources, volunteering and over-functioning behind the scenes at the expense of self and family, and enacting the plans of male leaders who flourish publicly while she suffers privately. The sampling of participants for my research study bears ample witness to this reality.

In the midst of my focus group study, I realized that I did not have a clear idea of how to articulate a need for womanist theology to Black churchwomen. I could list the historical harms of patriarchy and capitalism and how they manifest in Black churches, but I could not articulate what kept the system operating or explain why womanist theology was a viable remedy. I started looking for ways to better convey the need for this work beyond my personal interests and experiences of liberation. Through my research, I encountered the writings of Antonio Gramsci. His work gave me a better understanding of what I was asking women to confront, prompting me to curate content for focus group sessions that enabled Black churchwomen to witness the tangible power of womanist theology to confront systems perpetuating generational harm.

The work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian activist and Marxist thought-leader who wrote about cultural hegemony in his *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderini del carcere*, 1929-1935), provides a foundation for the manner in which I address womanist theology as a response to the patriarchal Black church. Gramsci’s ideas primarily pertain to capitalism and the political and social relationships among classes in the early twentieth century.

Popular among the working class, Gramsci's ideas led to his imprisonment by Mussolini's government. Contemporary ideas of hegemony have evolved from Gramsci's theory and been appropriated across various political and social contexts. His theory on cultural hegemony is layered and complex, but a key aspect is that ruling classes exert control over societies through the exploitation and construction of cultural norms [beliefs and behaviors] that govern the social classes and hierarchy.⁹ It involves aspects of both consent to and coercion by capitalist powers.¹⁰ Politics and economics are used to control the people—especially middle-class people. The writers of *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* provide many examples of what this kind of social relationship looks like for dominant and subordinate parties. One example is that “the social construction of the 19th-century lady as a norm for all women” meant that desirable ladies focused on housekeeping and motherhood, whereas women of lower social status worked outside of their homes.¹¹ Such social norms wed capitalism and patriarchy and cast gender equality as “*un-natural*”.¹²

My research explores what makes Black churchwomen form what Gramsci names as *counter-hegemony*, a mode of resisting the ruling powers by forming an alliance of

⁹ Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy write about Gramsci's work, “Rather, hegemony exists only when dominant social forces represent and incorporate some very real material interests of subordinate groups into their social relationships. Without conscious choice, hegemony disappears, and the social order slips to various forms of domination, coercion, or co-optation. Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Inc., 2000), 3.

¹⁰ Adam David Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy*, (London, England: Pluto Press, 2007), 95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹² *Ibid.*, 157-158.

members from subordinate classes who come together in opposition to toxic hegemony.¹³ Before this can happen, the people must acknowledge their discontent with the dominant hegemony and ‘change their minds’ from consent to confrontation. In Black church spaces, this may require giving up the role of the good and model Black woman who gains admiration for dressing and carrying herself in certain ways to appease the patriarchal hegemony. Black churches that esteem Black heteronormative leadership keep women in kitchens instead of in pulpits. Black women in the academy have modeled counter-hegemony through creating womanist theology as an area of study. Feminist and liberationist theologies were formed as counter-hegemonies to mainstream theologies, yet these failed to address the intersectional issues and needs of Black women. Therefore, Black women scholars spoke up and sought to counter the mainstream theologies by elevating ideas and practices that spoke to their religious and spiritual experiences. Black churchwomen can learn from the work of these womanist scholars who created spaces for themselves in rooms made for male ideas and leadership. The work of these scholars has paved the way for people of faith to connect with a God who loves them in ways that mainstream theologies do not allow. Research has shown that less than twenty percent of Black congregations engage regularly with womanist theology,¹⁴ which means that there is still work to do.

“Counterhegemony cannot be imposed; it must win the hearts and minds of masses of individuals to a new vision of culture, society, and humanity.”¹⁵ I did not begin

¹³ Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, 301.

¹⁴ Sandra L. Barnes, “Whosoever will let her come,” 379.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

my research with the idea that winning the hearts and minds of Black churchwomen over to womanist theological views would be easy. However, I soon realized that it requires much more intentionality and time to address the reasons why a new vision of patriarchal Black church culture is critical. For those who have not been formally theologically trained, the process may be painstakingly slow. If the subordinates within a system are content with only getting certain needs met, then they will not challenge the established hegemony (even when the overall system is destructive to their well-being). Delores Williams and other womanist theologians have positioned womanist theology as a counterhegemonic approach to patriarchal theology.¹⁶ In my study, research participants were asked about why they remained in the male leadership-controlled spaces that they called their church homes, and some of them responded that they stayed because “it was not all bad,” and others voiced, “I have not felt led to leave yet.” My research shows that gathering Black women to share their stories can bring the experienced harms of cultural hegemony to the surface, and this can contribute to changing their minds about the system. In order to provide a challenge to the system, the counter-hegemony must address the failings of the hegemony.

A critical way that Black churchwomen are instrumental in adhering to heteropatriarchal cultural hegemony is through promoting a system of embodying suffering and sacrifice. This shows up in Black churches through the myth of what Walker-Barnes describes as the “StrongBlackWoman”—based on the fallacy that Black

¹⁶ “Today a theological corrective [womanist theology] is developing that has considerable potential for bringing black women’s experience into theology so that black women will see the need to transform the sexist character of the churches and their theology.” Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xvii.

women have a “capacity to withstand suffering without complaint.”¹⁷ This oppressive trope teaches Black women that God, scripture, and their churches need them to remain “strong” in the face of difficult circumstances. They are taught to believe that they are called to sacrifice themselves through work and to remain silent about their suffering in service to God and others. Many Black women provide ongoing monetary support to their congregations while they are financially struggling to pay their household expenses. Playing the StrongBlackWomen persona often brings Black churchwomen recognition, accolades, and even a degree of external power, even as they sacrifice their own needs. Walker-Barnes asserts that good communities can provide healing and flourishing in ways that deconstruct the StrongBlackWoman persona.¹⁸ My research explores womanist theology as a path to empowering StrongBlackWomen to choose life-giving wholeness through utilizing womanist biblical interpretation and critical engagement to push back against the hegemony and advocate for the well-being and moral courage of Black women.

Womanist theology is the counter-hegemony to the powers and principalities of the heteropatriarchal Black church hegemony. It challenges biblical interpretation, church traditions, and myths that are oppressive and do harm to Black churchwomen. Womanist theology can hold up the liberating religion that has become “home” while removing it from the exploitative religion of the plantation. Understanding the need for a counter-hegemony can be a long process. Therefore, creating a resource for Black churchwomen

¹⁷ Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 181-185.

that encourages them to name the harms of a Black church culture that privileges charismatic Black men is essential. The next section provides an overview of the history of womanist theology and exhibits arguments that position womanist theology as the best approach to counter the harmful hegemony of the Black church.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY WOMANIST THEOLOGY?

Womanist theology begins with the experiences of Black women as its point of departure. This experience includes not only Black women's activities in the larger society but also in the churches and reveals that Black women have often rejected the oppressive structure in the church as well.¹

-Jacquelyn Grant

I had anticipated this event for months. We dressed in our nicest clothes, determined the amount for our collective offering, and prayed for an impartation. I was headed with three of my best friends to a downtown hotel to hear Juanita Bynum preach and perform. We had all read her second book, *Matters of the Heart* (Charisma House, 2002), which was published during my first semester of college. For months, the four of us regularly prayed, fasted, and met for bible studies. As young women who desired to lead women's ministries of our own someday, we were captivated by Bynum's bold preaching and anointing.² During that time, Bynum was known for yelling out

¹ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ And Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 205.

² In recent years there have been much written about Bynum's preaching and her problematic calling Black women "hos". The Reverend Neichelle Guidry writes, "Bynum's ideas, and the proliferation of misogynist and white supremacist theologies in blackface, have pushed Black women into valleys, surrounded by dead and dry bones: dead desires, dead relationships, dead impulses, dead hearts. In receiving such teachings, we have received death; figurative enough for us to still be walking, but real enough for many of us to be zombies masquerading as good church girls." Neichelle Guidry, "#BlackSkinWhiteSin: Received: Black Women and Our Talking Bodies," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), February 13, 2017, <https://thefeministwire.com/2017/02/blackskinwhitesin-received-black-women-talking-bodies/>.

Candice Benbow writes, "...as a churched Black woman, I've been vocal of my love for Dr. Juanita Bynum as a preacher and how she has been a victim of the ways patriarchal Black Church leadership fetishizes Black women's bodies and abuses our labor. Yet, while I love her, I don't rock with her theologically. Hers is a vision of God and the body that is death dealing." Candice Benbow, "#BlackSkinWhiteSin: For Those Still Haunted by The Sheets (Why the Counter-Narrative Matters)," *The*

“Chaarrrge” during her sermons. We adapted this as the name of our group and decided it should be an acronym for: **C**hristians **H**aving **A** **R**eal **G**od **E**xperience.

My friends and I gathered a portion of the funds that we had received for an upcoming mission trip and turned them into an offering. I do not remember how much we gave in the offering—but it was the largest offering any of us had given at that point in our lives. We made the list of monetary amounts that Bynum invited to be brought to the altar before the general offering. That evening, we received what we considered a dynamic and substantive sermon and covered our journal with notes. The four of us left *charged* on a spiritual high. The friend who drove us was “caught up in the Spirit” to the point that she asked someone else to drive us back to our college campus.

I recall this experience without shame or regret, but as one of the spiritually formative seasons of my life. As I look back, I wish that eighteen-year-old Alexis had *more*—more tools for theological reflection, more models of women ministers, and more approaches to engage with scripture. I did not know then that ten years later, I would encounter more preaching women and readings that would liberate me in ways that I had not imagined were possible. It was then that I began to re-imagine myself, God, and my vocation. I do not have a ministry like Bynum’s, but I have received an impartation and been transformed by the ministries of Katie Geneva Cannon, Renita J. Weems, Delores S. Williams, and others. Womanist theology has given me a way to re-imagine God and how God might be calling me to live in this world. So now at thirty-eight, I write the

resource that eighteen-year-old me and my friends needed in order to envision a more liberative, loving, and just God.

The following chapter will provide background information on the term “womanist,” a brief overview of womanist theological scholarship, and how these are critical foundations for my research. One purpose of this study is to explore how Black women who serve in leadership in their churches engage with and respond to what is called *womanist theology*. Before arguing how creating space for womanist theological discourse can change the mindsets of Black churchwomen, I will explain how womanist theology has the power to shape one’s way of being and believing. Womanist theology is about Black women finding liberation in the God-talk and answering the call to pursue liberation and equity for human beings.

Womanist theology was founded upon Alice Walker’s definition of “womanish” in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*: “1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior...”³ The definition is long and layered.⁴ Black feminist

³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

⁴ “1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mamma, why are we brown,

and process theologian Monica Coleman provides a description of womanist theology that I use as a foundation for this research:

“As a form of liberation theology, womanist theologies aim for the freedom of oppressed peoples and creatures. More specifically, womanist theologies add the goals of survival, quality of life, and wholeness to black theology’s goals of liberation and justice. Womanist theologians analyze the oppressive aspects of society that prevent black women from having the quality of life and wholeness that God desires for them and for all of creation.”⁵

I pursue my work in terms of creating a space for Black women to have a quality of life that includes freedom and wholeness in plentitude. My research introduces Black churchwomen to a study of womanist theology by inviting them to reflect upon their life experiences, the extent to which they pursue wholeness, and the “oppressive aspects of society” as revealed through their ministry contexts.

Part of the challenge of this research is that the term “womanist” typically refers to the idea of centering African American women’s experiences that speak to multiple oppressions, but it lacks a standard definition.⁶ Unlike the term “feminist,” Nyasha Junior describes how the term *womanist* identifies and conflates the scholar and her scholarship,

pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mamma, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi).

⁵ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 11.

⁶ Nyasha Junior writes how use of the term may or may not refer to Walker’s definition (113). “Womanist biblical interpretation does not have a clear definition or a consensus regarding key characteristics. Furthermore, currently, it does not involve any debate regarding a definition or characteristics.” Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2015), 120.

whereas “feminist” speaks to a “tool that can be used by anyone.”⁷ It is one of the reasons why Nyasha Junior, Monica Coleman, and other Black women religious scholars do not define [nor confine] themselves by the self-labeling of “womanist.”⁸ When “womanist theology” is discussed in this paper, it is referencing perspectives that center the lived experiences of Black, more specifically African American, women through the lens in which they read Scripture, do theological reflection, and deconstruct oppression (precipitated by race, class, and gender) that hinders flourishing. This kind of theological lens affects the way that Black women think about sexuality, doctrine, and the inclusion of others. It is a way of deconstructing and re-orienting their lives in resistance to the heteropatriarchal status quo. I will use various parts of Walker’s definition throughout the study.

Ethicist Cheryl Sanders writes that womanism is traditionally a broad category, “The fact is that womanist is essentially a secular cultural category whose theological and ecclesial significations are rather tenuous. Theological content too easily gets ‘read into’ the womanist concept, whose central emphasis remains the self-assertion and struggle of

⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁸ “When I read Walker’s definition, I feel at home, but the trajectory of womanist religious scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture. There are not enough chairs, couches, or beds for me or many of the black women I know and love. It isn’t a place where we can be who we are in some of the most important ways we live—sexually, spiritually, or politically.” Monica Coleman, “Must I be Womanist?,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (April 2006): 86, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.20487856&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

I do not identify myself as a feminist or as a womanist. I do not find these terms to be useful for my personal identification, especially since they are burdened by so many conflicting assumptions. If I saw that I am a womanist, by itself that label tells you nothing about me, my research agenda, or my political allegiances. Instead of a one-word litmus test, I prefer someone to ask me directly about my contributions to scholarship, teaching, or service to the academy and other communities.” Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, xxi.

black women for freedom, with or without the aid of God or Jesus or anybody else.”⁹ For this research, I choose to focus on *womanist theology*, which is meant to explore the intersections that are revealed through Black women having God-talk. Moreover, it seeks to show the complexities of Black women building their lives around false perceptions of God that become detrimental to their God-talk and self-talk. If the designation “womanist” is only for those in the academy or for those who have undergone formal theological training, then it will be short-sighted in the work that it claims it sets out to do. It has yet to be widely seen if churchwomen exploring womanist theology promote a misuse of the term *or* if it contextualizes the ideas in ways that call more Black women to what Gilkes names as “self-assertion and struggle.” Black women who have graduated from institutions of theological education included in this research may have previously encountered womanist theology, but they sought to deepen their understanding through this study. In order for womanist theology to liberate Black churchwomen beyond the academy, it must be taught to them as the tool that they can use to dismantle heteropatriarchal hegemonic structures and build a life-giving theological framework.

Womanism is engaged beyond theological studies. There are religious scholars in the fields of biblical studies, ethics, theology, pastoral care, and homiletics who use the term to signify different concepts. As Junior noted in her text *Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, there is no specific definition of the term.¹⁰ In the area of religious

⁹ Cheryl J. Sanders, “Christian Ethics and Theology in the Womanist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, (October 1, 1989): 86.

¹⁰ “Womanist biblical interpretation does not have a clear definition or a consensus regarding key characteristics.” Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2015), 120.

scholarship, the term “womanist” was officially introduced through Katie Cannon’s 1985 article, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness.”¹¹ Although there is work by Black foremothers that is often deemed proto-womanist in the years before,¹² “womanist theology” was introduced in 1987 by Delores S. Williams in her article “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices.”¹³ The late 1980s and early 1990s brought about an increase in the writings and conversations of religious scholars producing womanist works. A catalyst for this was the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) first convening of the Womanist Approach to Religion and Society initiated by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes.

The AAR gathering that became known as the Womanist Consultation helped to further the work of numerous womanist scholars.¹⁴ Through their work, a myriad of womanist scholarship materialized by academics who were willing to speak and write as a part of the womanist conversation—those such as Cheryl J. Sanders, Emilie Townes, Marcia Riggs, Angela Sims, and Kelly Brown Douglas. In the years that followed, several dynamic contributions were made to the area of womanist theology. Some of these contributions include Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), Renita Weems’ *Just*

¹¹ Emilie M. Townes, “Womanist Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, 159.

¹² Emilie Townes names such figures as Jarena Less, Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Amanda Berry Smith, Anna Julia Cooper and writers, who produced notable works that can “serve as resources for womanist theology.” *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³ Delores Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices,” *Christianity and Crisis* 47, (March 2, 1987): 66-70, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/womanist-theology-black-womens-voices/>.

¹⁴ The numerous womanist scholars include those who are named in this section, and also those who have read and will read their works and be transformed through them.

a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible (1988), Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), Emilie M. Townes' *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (1993), Kelly Brown Douglas' *The Black Christ*, and Marcia Riggs' *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (1994). There are contemporary scholars and church women who speak of their introduction to and alignment with womanist theology resulting from reading Jacquelyn Grant's 1989 text *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. In the 2000s, the works of theologians M. Shawn Copeland, Monica Coleman, and Kelly Brown Douglas have not only continued the conversation but have expanded and deepened it.

In the roundtable discussion, "Must I Be Womanist?" Coleman asks, "What would it mean to discuss a third generation of black religious scholarship?"¹⁵ She likens the possibility of a third wave of womanists to the third-wave feminists who advanced the political and social agendas that the previous generations made possible. "Third wavers want to live out the rights for which the second generation fought."¹⁶ Cannon's response to Coleman's allegation that "womanist religious scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture,"¹⁷ is that the first-wave laid the foundation and the third-wave womanists are called to "furnish the interior, to provide supportive objects that indicate a readiness for occupancy."¹⁸ I enter this research with the hope that it might add some

¹⁵ Coleman, "Must I be Womanist?," 94.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Coleman, "Must I Be Womanist?," 86.

¹⁸ Cannon, Response to "Must I Be Womanist?," 97.

furnishings to the sturdy womanist structure—pieces that are aesthetically appealing and provide comfort for Black churchwomen who have been standing at church doors and sitting on hard second-row pews for too long. This research seeks to contribute furnishings that allow for rest and tables that are large enough for all who desire to dine at them.

Even though a precise definition of womanist theology is elusive, my research evidences a broad scholarly consensus that womanist theology is rooted in a calling to liberation and wholeness by a God who desires these for all humanity. Cheryl Sanders explains that it is “intellectually dishonest” to name someone or something a “womanist” that does not meet all of the specifications in Walker’s definition.¹⁹ I draw from parts of Walker’s definition when introducing the term “womanist” to a focus group—a feminist of color, one who loves women, who affirms lesbianism, loves the Spirit, and loves herself. Although I understand Sanders’ assertion, my research demonstrates that many Black churchwomen who are not religious scholars require a greater unpacking of Walker’s definition and a nuanced exploration of the possibilities of what it means. I led a survey of womanist theology for Christian women in order to reveal what might be liberative and salvific for them. This research takes seriously the disapproval of womanist scholars who express that Christian womanists have “desecrated Walker’s meaning, practice, and intent of the word but have also reinscribed the institutional fetters that

¹⁹ Cheryl Sanders writes, “Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect complete compliance with all of these criteria as a prerequisite for employing womanist nomenclature. But it is intellectually dishonest to label a person, movement or idea as womanist on the basis of only one or two of these criteria to the exclusion of all the others.” Cheryl J. Sanders, “Christian Ethics and Theology in the Womanist Perspective,” 86.

come with organized religion and its concomitant ‘isms,’ including heterosexism.”²⁰ The goal is not to make more Black churchwomen womanists, but to provide education and deconstruction that aligns with the vision and methods of womanist theology. One way of doing this that meets Black Christian women where they are, which diverges from general womanist scholarship, is to center Christian scripture and Jesus the Christ.

For Black churchwomen to begin to engage with womanist theology, it is necessary to begin with womanist biblical interpretation. This requires an explanation of the ways that subordination of women and misogyny are justified in some ministry contexts due to heteropatriarchal hermeneutics and cultural norms. If in Black churches, Black-cisgendered-heterosexual men are preaching ninety percent of the time or more, and making key decisions for the community, then the liberating God-talk of womanist theology will stay in academic classrooms and rarely in the pulpit or pews on Sunday mornings. “A womanist biblical hermeneutics takes as its starting point the fundamental notion that people have power, not texts,”²¹ writes Renita Weems. If the people in the pews come to understand that they have power that does not primarily rest in the teachings and biblical interpretations of those in the pulpit, *then* they might become unshackled from the texts and traditions that keep them bound within death-dealing circumstances. The next section will explain the kind of methodology that I use to

²⁰ Irene Monroe, “Must I be a womanist?,” *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22.1 (April 2006): 110, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.20487856&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²¹ Renita Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 55.

explore womanist theological formation among Black churchwomen and how it can contribute to the dismantling of patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony.

What is a Womanist Methodology for Black Churchwomen in the Pews?

Womanist methodology centers the lives of Black women—their stories, experiences, and reflections. My research seeks to do this in theory and practice. The work I do is rooted in *story*. The stories of womanist scholars, research participants, and the stories that are still forming as Black women are learning and unlearning. This study acknowledges that their stories and their theologies matter; and not that they are secondary to mainstream theological voices. The work proceeds with an understanding of what Delores Williams meant when she wrote, “Whether we talk about Jesus in relation to atonement theory or christology, we womanists must be guided more by black Christian women’s voices, faith and experience than by anything that was decided centuries ago at Chalcedon.”²² My research study invites Black women to begin to confront and then undo the patriarchal structures in which they live and worship. This approach begins by being disruptive. A womanist approach calls for a disruption of formation that privileges the works of Betty Friedan, James Cone, T.D. Jakes, and Walter Brueggemann over those such as Alice Walker, Katie Cannon, Renita Weems, and Monica Coleman.²³ This research pushes back against the patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony by illustrating that Black women’s stories and contributions to the

²² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 180.

²³ This is an allusion to a statement by Monica Coleman that deeply resonated with me and I have found to be true, “I can’t imagine what kind of scholar I would be, what kind of woman I would be, if I had not encountered Walker, Cannon, and Renita Weems, and encountered them *before* Wailliam Faulkner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Walter Bruggemann.” Coleman, “Must I be a Womanist?,” 86.

church and the academy are prolific and not substandard. A womanist methodology calls for disruption of the status quo in spaces where Black women's liberation is not fully welcome and celebrated. Furthermore, it does this through using a womanist pedagogy that centers the lived experiences of Black women and calls them together to hear and learn from one another.

Although this study will not primarily occur within a traditional classroom, womanist pedagogy is an important and relevant method for this study. This approach of teaching is about liberation and transformation of self and society—and not only for Black women. “It is a sincere effort to form, inform, and shape communities wherein multiple forms of justice take place in an attempt to rehumanize, establish justice for all, and honor the wholeness that is possible for the earth community.”²⁴ This kind of method begins with acknowledging that “epistemological hegemony is reordered.”²⁵ Knowledge is no longer a tool for elitist groups to wield for domination or to do harm to the ignorant.²⁶ The lived experiences of each individual become valuable and worthy of attention because the individual is valuable and worthy of experience. Stories are lifted up that push back against the destructive narratives of the dominant culture. This kind of pedagogy is needed in Black church spaces where knowledge can easily become a

²⁴ Melanie L. Harris, “Womanist Wholeness and Community,” *Faith, Feminism, and Scholarship*, ed. by Melanie L. Harris and Kathryn Ott, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 131.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ A former teaching assistant of Katie Canon, Charlene Jin Lee, explains that the womanist pedagogy that was embodied in Canon's classroom had to do with asking, “What kind of knowledge is legitimate? Whose knowledge is legitimate?” She goes on to explain that, “In Dr. Cannon's classroom, legitimate knowledge was found in the voicing of living texts each of us carry, in forgotten narratives emerging with public language, in the muted voices of struggle excavated from the brittle rocks of unrecorded history, and in the printed pages of ‘textbooks’.” Charlene Jin Lee, “I Come From A Place: Reflections on Katie Cannon's Womanist Classroom,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 74, no. 1 (December 11, 2019): 31-37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964319876579>.

commodity of educated Black men and certain kinds of educated Black women. It is in these spaces that titles and power create a greater supply and demand for a person's knowledge. This research seeks to push back on performative knowledge by inviting communities to do theology together.²⁷ How could it liberate Black churchwomen to realize that their voices, stories, and questions are legitimate—and even necessary?²⁸ Modeling womanist pedagogy in the focus group and exploring it with congregational leaders provided ideas for reforming their pedagogical practices to be more thoughtful and inclusive within their congregations.

In order to figure out what changes the minds of Black churchwomen, my research could not be exclusively based on personal experiences, biblical interpretation, and encounters with womanist theology. Life must be exegeted in community. Therefore, I created the 8-Week Womanist Workshop. The small group format was chosen to cultivate a community that provides space for storytelling, deep listening, reflecting, and engaging critically with womanist theology. Walker-Barnes discusses how *koinonia* is necessary for a womanist ethic of care and developing critical consciousness that supports the healing of the StrongBlackWoman.²⁹ A womanist variety of *koinonia* can be found in spaces that nurture reciprocity in care, vulnerable storytelling, and provide

27 “When we are fully present in worship, we participate in a creative theological process daring to raise and answer questions about the nature and reality of God. Theological work cannot simply take place in academic spaces. It is not a dry set of questions to be posed by those who are qualified, those who have a particular set of educational credentials. You do theology in community. And the best theology reflects the cares and concerns of that community.” Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit*, 83.

28 Emilie M. Townes, “Womanist Theology,” in *Encyclopedia for Women and Religion in America*, 163-164.

29 Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 181-184.

safety for Black women.³⁰ The 8-Week Womanist Workshop seeks to equip a community of Black churchwomen who will venture into new gardens that they did not plant nor tend but that will nourish them in ways that they have yet to know that they were hungering for. Such digging, seeding, and tasting together possesses ample power to change our minds.³¹

Womanist theology, methodology, and pedagogy are used in the following research approach to explore *what makes a woman change her mind*—what could prompt a Black churchwoman to challenge the heteronormative hegemonies of the Black church? These methods and the writings of womanist theologians guided my research and helped me to consider the kind of resource that is needed to create a counter-hegemonic challenge to the harmful Black clergymen leadership and structure that subordinates women. The counter-hegemony will not often be found in the Bible but in the minds and bodies of Black churchwomen who read the texts with a womanist lens. This necessitates an intentional cultivation of womanist theological formation for Black women in the pews. I am convinced that this study has to lead to not only challenging the hegemony that harms Black churchwomen, but it must offer something more—good news and tangible tools. The 8-Week Womanist Workshop was developed after years of

³⁰ Ibid., 162, 168.

³¹ “Thus the ‘garden’ became an important beginning point for our method of doing feminist theology. For doing theology in a holistic way requires us to include not only our own experiences and stories but also a critical analysis of the effect this has had on our lives, so that we are prepared to understand the stories and the social, political, and historical analysis of those whose lives are quite different from ours, and especially those whose lives are shaped by oppression. The beginning of partnership in dialogue is ‘digging in your own garden,’ so that you know what gifts you can bring to the global table talk with your sisters and what parts of your life might be harmful to others. Once we have understood the oppressive and liberating social structures of our own reality more clearly, we are better able to understand the social structures that affect other people’s lives.” Katie Geneva Cannon, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Kwok Pui-lan, and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Our Mothers’ Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1988), 14.

conversations with and journeying alongside Black churchwomen. It is a process that invites Black churchwomen to tell their stories and to sharpen their tools for liberating themselves and their communities. The next chapter details the format and content of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop.

CHAPTER THREE

THE 8-WEEK WOMANIST WORKSHOP AS A FOCUS GROUP

I got to fan the flame again of my feminine self and start to awake to the realities of God in female form, the systematic oppression within the black church and what I am committed to do differently. My Sanctified Imagination is open again.¹

-8-Week Womanist Workshop Participant

My research study used womanist methodologies to curate a space that centered and assessed the impact of womanist theological formation on Black churchwomen. The participants underwent a process that emphasized storytelling, expanded their imagination around biblical interpretation, and engaged critically with their beliefs and church contexts. The readings, reflection questions, and structure of the sessions were carefully selected with the hope of learning more about what resonates with interests of the participants. I sought to learn about how their interests and discontent within their contexts may have stirred a longing for change. In the participants' contexts, it was rare that women were invited into spaces that encouraged theological inquiry within their churches' walls. The hope was to use womanist theological instruction to figure out the factors that cause Black churchwomen to change their minds and their ways about patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony that does them harm. More specifically, how would their minds change about their callings, contexts, and well-being as a result of engaging with womanist theology in community. In this chapter, I re-state the goals of

¹ This comment was submitted anonymously via the 8-Week Womanist Workshop Evaluation online form.

this research, outline the format of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop process, and explain the need for diversity within the focus group.

The goals of this research study are to:

- Introduce womanist theology as a counter-hegemonic movement against patriarchal Black church hegemony and for the flourishing of Black women.
- Explore the needs and interests of Black churchwomen that align with womanist theology.
- Cultivate a space for connection, theological study, and critical engagement with womanist thought.
- Stimulate thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts through a womanist lens and womanist biblical interpretation.
- Develop a resource that encourages Black churchwomen to study womanist theology.

The preparations for the research study were important to ensure that the design enabled me to achieve my goals. After being granted IRB approval on February 12, 2022, I published an application online for interested persons to apply for participation in the 8-Week Womanist Workshop focus group. I sought to find six to eight participants who identified as Black women serving in leadership within predominantly Black congregations. I created a webpage that connected to my personal website to communicate information about the study and meeting dates. A pre-survey was included to collect demographics and background information about applicants. The application form was shared with colleagues and classmates in hopes of attaining a diverse group of participants with high levels of interest. As I reviewed applications, I asked: Who most needed it? Who could commit to all/almost all of the sessions? and Who could most benefit from a community of learning and a liberative theological experience? After invitees were invited to participate and confirmed, they were provided the informed consent document and asked to complete and return it before the group's first session.

The group met weekly during the months of April and May in 2022 via Zoom on Tuesdays from 7:00-8:30 PM Eastern Standard Time. The following sections will outline how the research process employs a womanist methodology and pedagogy in an eight-week focus group that concentrated on cultivating connection, theological study, and critical engagement around womanist thought.

The focus of week one was introductions. I wanted participants to consider: Who is here? Why are we here? What is expected of me? and What material will be covered? I explained my role as the facilitator and the aims of the research. The group discussed a covenant of presence that detailed discussion guidelines and explained what it meant to hold space for difference. Each participant was invited to give an introduction, sharing about herself and what brought her to the group. We also reviewed the schedule and format for each session. Finally, we concluded with an introduction to the terminology (*womanist, womanist theology, liberation, feminist, re-orientation, heteropatriarchal*), and a question-and-answer period.

Week two: “An Introduction to Womanist Theology.” This session took place during Holy Week, so we began with a meditation on suffering, surrogacy, and survival using the work of Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness* (chapter one, “Hagar’s Story: A Route to Black Women’s Issues”). Participants spent time discussing Alice Walker’s definitions of *womanist*. I expounded on what it meant to cultivate a space for womanist pedagogy. This early session included a discourse on the history of Black women’s minds, bodies, and spirits using Katie Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics*. Participants were asked to read Genesis 16 and 21 before the third session.

Week three: “What is Womanist Biblical Interpretation?” This session considered womanist approaches to Christian scripture and the narratives of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis 16 and 21. Brief consideration was given to certain New Testament texts that have been used to oppress women. Excerpts from Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness* and Renita Weems’ *Just a Sister Away* were read alongside biblical readings. We considered the ways that Black women can devalue ourselves when we internalize heteropatriarchy and develop a level of self-hate (and how narrow personal biblical interpretation can contribute to this problem).

Week four: “What is Womanist Biblical Interpretation? Part II.” This week, we were in conversation with Weems’ *Just a Sister Away* chapter 11, “Gospel of Mary” and Acts 1:12-26. It was during this conversation that the group came alive as they were introduced to new ideas of how to do a close reading through a womanist lens that seemed to resonate with them and expand their imaginations.

Week five: “Womanist Sexuality within The Black Church.” This session examined historical happenings that inform the current issues of how sexuality is generally taught and talked about in Black churches. We discussed the importance of learning to hold space for congregants dealing with complex and “taboo topics” for which most Black churches and their leaders rarely have sufficient answers. To prepare for this conversation, participants were asked to read selected excerpts from chapters two, three, and four of *Sexuality And The Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* by Kelly Brown Douglas.

Week six: “Patriarchal Structures: Reflections Within Your Context.” We gave our attention to exploring how heteropatriarchal structures and mindsets act as oppressive

and destructive within Black churches. The entry point into our conversation was through the assigned reading of a journal article titled, “They Have Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival.”² We shared and examined personal stories that were stirred up through our readings and reflected on them through the following questions: *What is the Holy Spirit showing you? What in your ministry context needs your attention? How do you see heteropatriarchy doing harm in your context?*

Week seven: “In My Grandmother’s House.” For this session, we read chapters two, four, and nine from Yolanda Pierce's *In My Grandmother’s House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit*. Dr. Pierce spent an hour with our group discussing grandmother theology and sharing stories. She answered questions from the group and encouraged us on our journey towards seeing our church structures and traditions through a womanist lens. It was an enriching and inspiring conversation.

Week eight: “Celebration & Conclusion: What’s next?” Participants were invited to speak about how womanist theology and the content of the group have helped them to consider new ideas and/or change their minds. We shared reflections as we reviewed the material presented during the previous seven weeks. In preparation for our final session, the group was asked to consider their answers to the following questions: *What womanist writings have most resonated with you? What parts of Walker’s definition speak to you? What parts do you struggle to claim? What do you know now that you did not know eight weeks ago?* A post-survey was given to allow me to gain a clearer understanding of the

² Alexis Carter Thomas, “They Have Lived to Tell,” 62-75.

work that took place and to learn what may have been the most beneficial in content, practices, and material covered during the sessions.

It was important that the focus group be made up of Black churchwomen who were diverse in background, denomination, and initial views on patriarchal Black church hegemony. Theological diversity can enrich the experience of groups by exposing them to other traditions and expanding their theological purview. Womanist work involves cultivating a community of sojourners who commit to journey together towards liberation even if their pace, fit-ness, challenges, and arrival times differ. Audre Lorde aptly expresses a key reason for using focus groups in researching womanist theology:

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.³

This research explores how a womanist theological community can work towards liberation by welcoming differences that are not to be ignored, edited, or disparaged. Renita Weems writes that liberation comes not only through being with people who are different, but “reaching out to one another across the gulf of their real flesh-and-blood...It means hearing people out, respecting the way they read and interpret stories, making room for them at the table, and sharing power with them.”⁴ Although my research centers Black women’s lived experiences, it also builds upon the premise that Black churchwomen’s experiences are not monolithic. Womanist methodologies maintain an

³ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

⁴ Renita Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, 62.

expectation that Black women must welcome differences and celebrate particularities as signs of openness to new ideas and ways of being. To call a community of individuals to be “forces for change,” in the words of Lorde, will empower them to view one another’s stories and perspectives as valuable in the work of liberation. In the following chapter, it will become clear how difference played an integral role in nurturing the dynamics of the focus group.

One strategy that I used to achieve my research goals involved reading and engaging literature by womanist theologians in a community of Black churchwomen. The research design that I mapped out called attention to various problems of patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony in the areas of biblical interpretation, internalized patriarchy, and sexuality while inviting Black churchwomen to consider solutions together. Womanist theological formation holds a key to dismantling the kind of theological and ecclesiastical structures and practices that subjugate and mistreat well over half of the membership of Black churches. Learning from a diverse group about their theological formation, biblical interpretations, and how different churches devalue the personhood and gifts of women has been immensely helpful for this study. In a postmodern society that invites repair through asking critical questions and deconstructing one’s beliefs, womanist theology provides a way of thinking and being in a world that was not constructed for the thriving of the marginalized majority—particularly Black women. In the next chapter, I describe how the 8-Week-Womanist Workshop became a means of empowering Black women who serve in congregational leadership to begin to change their minds about how they think about their faith, callings, and churches.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RESULTS OF THE 8-WEEK WOMANIST WORKSHOP

I felt affirmed in a way. This whole affair made me nervous to start out - most of my church experience comes from a place of hurt and constant challenge...this was refreshing and challenging. I had begun the process of detaching myself from the faith as it was clear the faith did not love me. While I leave this experience ravenous for more information to consume and develop. There is this level of peace that I have acquired from simply being in a room with no animosity and ready to learn. I am full.¹

-8-Week Womanist Workshop Participant

During April and May of 2022, I facilitated an eight-week focus group that provided an introduction to womanist theology for Black churchwomen. The focus group was constructed using a womanist methodological framework that maintained the notion that the stories and lives of Black women were central to its approach and theology. The process called attention to those stories that highlighted how the intersectional oppressions of race, class, and gender affect Black churchwomen. The focus group was made up of six Black churchwomen: five were ordained, all were college educated, three had earned a Master of Divinity, and ages ranged from 33-58 years. All attended churches where the membership was entirely over ninety-five percent Black. Two participants attended Baptist churches, two attended interdenominational churches, and two attended non-denominational churches. Although there were not as many focus group participants as I would have liked, each participant attended all sessions (with only a single participant absence during the eight weeks). Despite the low number of

¹ This comment was submitted anonymously via the 8-Week Womanist Workshop Evaluation online form.

participants and lack of denominational diversity, I was able to gain a great deal of insight and make progress towards achieving my research goals. In the following sections, I will highlight themes and discussion topics and demonstrate how research goals one through three were achieved.² I will also detail how the results illustrate that participants moved towards acquiring a greater understanding of the need to dismantle heteropatriarchal hegemonic structures within Black churches. The following sections within this chapter include the focus group application, biblical interpretation, intersectionality, sexuality, autoethnography, and grandmother theology.

The Application

The online application form was designed to gather information from applicants that helped me to learn about an applicant's interests, church background, and major life circumstances that may affect their psychosocial well-being. The following is the content for the 8-Week Womanist Workshop application:

Name: _____ Age: _____

Phone: _____ Email Address: _____

Church Membership:

Briefly tell us about the church to which you belong.

How long have you been a member at your current church?

Church Involvement:

In what capacities do/have you serve/d?

² Goals: 1) Examine the needs and interests of Black churchwomen in congregational leadership; 2) Cultivate a space for connection, theological study, and critical engagement with womanist thought; and 3) Stimulate thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts through a womanist lens and womanist hermeneutics.

Why are you interested in this online course?

Are you familiar with womanist theology?

It is not required that you be familiar with the topic to apply.

- Yes, very familiar
- Yes, somewhat familiar
- No

Have you had any of the following occur within the past 10 years?

- Medical crisis
- Death of a loved one
- Been a caregiver
- Change in employment
- Change in living situation
- Change in marital status
- Major financial setback

Other: _____

Share about one of the items that was checked in the previous question. How has this particular issue affected you? *If you checked "other" please describe the issue as well as how it affected you.*

In a 250-500 word essay, please reflect on your ministry involvement and leadership roles. What have been the joys, challenges and lessons learned from being engaged in ministry at your local church? What challenges have you faced in your church and/or work context as a result of being a Black woman?

If selected for this online cohort, do you foresee any problems with attending sessions on Tuesdays from 7:00-8:30 PM EST?

In reading the responses that were submitted, I learned that there was a great deal of church hurt within each applicant. Three of the applicants indicated that they were unfamiliar with womanist theology, but their pain and noticings of the patriarchal standards within their congregations spoke the language and rightful rage of womanism. In regard to the question that began, “In a 250-500 word essay, please reflect on your

ministry involvement and leadership roles...,” one applicant responded with the following:

I find male church leaders are often very happy to have me serve in roles that are typically reserved for women. These roles include but are not limited to working with children or teaching classes. It is a very painful process when trying to reach another level in the church. What I find most challenging as a Minister in my local church is the good old boy system that seems to have been in place for centuries. The following is an example.

The approximate ratio of women to men ministers in my church is approximately 5 to 1, with women being in the majority. However, when the pastor needs someone to stand in the pulpit to preach on a Sunday morning, 9 times out of 10 it is a male minister who is chosen...

The following is a selection of the response to the same question from another applicant:

Another challenge I have faced as a woman is just feeling overlooked and out of the circle. Our church is run by men. They definitely have their circle, and I definitely am not in it and I know that me being a woman has something to do with it.

Womanist Biblical Interpretation

The focus group began with defining and modeling what *womanist biblical interpretation* is and why it is integral to the well-being of Black churchwomen. This phrase was explained as paying attention to the scriptural context (i.e., who has power, who is speaking, who is present), readers’ experiences, and embodied knowledge that Black women bring in an effort to analyze and find meaning within the biblical text.

Wilda Gafney provides a helpful list of questions to consider in a womanist approach to the biblical text.³ It is illuminating and liberating to ask such questions that many Black

³ Wilda Gafney’s twelve questions in *Womanist Midrash* and explanation of what it means to do womanist biblical interpretation, “The primary womanist principles that shape this text are (1) the legitimacy of black women’s biblical interpretation as normative and authoritative, (2) the inherent value of each member of a community in the text and interpreting the text, (3) talking back to the text, and (4) making it plain, the work of exegesis from translation to interpretation.” Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist*

churchwomen have never inquired of the text (for example: who is speaking and or/active? How do the values articulated in the text and its interpretation affect the well-being of the communities that black women inhabit?).⁴ It is also frustrating to witness the apprehension of Black churchwomen who do not feel that they have the right to ask such questions of a text that they hold to be divinely inspired. We spent time addressing what it means to engage with a hermeneutic of suspicion instead of reacting with distrust to that which goes against their faith and church traditions. The focus group entered the conversation on womanist hermeneutics with these words written by Monica Coleman as our guide:

Women have to reclaim their right to read and interpret sacred texts for themselves and should not have to be subject to the misogynistic, patriarchal interest of powerful male readers; and women of color have to insist upon their right to read and interpret sacred texts for themselves and should not have to defend or apologize for their interpretations to privileged women in the culture who remain ignorant to how class, race, and colonialism shape and divide us as women.⁵

I wanted the group to know that there is a history of harm to women that has been justified by poor translations, misreadings, and the patriarchal culture of scripture.

Weeks two and three of the focus group sought to accomplish the third goal of the research: to stimulate thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts through a womanist lens and womanist biblical interpretation. The content found in the opening chapter of Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness*, along with the introduction and chapters on Sarah and Hagar in Gafney's *Womanist Midrash*, provided a clear

Midrash: A Reintroduction To The Women Of The Torah And The Throne (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 8.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Coleman, "Must I Be Womanist?," 57.

pathway to enter the discussion on womanist biblical interpretation. Hagar’s story—what the text reveals and the questions that it leaves readers with—became the starting point for the conversation. Helping Black women to come into an understanding of how “A womanist biblical hermeneutics takes as its starting point the fundamental notion that people have power, not texts,”⁶ is both challenging and exciting. When one has been raised to read scripture as a sacred practice in which there is power in the words on the page because they were divinely chosen by God, it is difficult to change one’s mind about attributing power to the text. I set out to cultivate a space where Black women could read and exegete scripture without the patriarchal gaze. I wanted them to learn that they can, “insist upon their right to read and interpret sacred texts for themselves and should not have to defend or apologize for their interpretations to privileged women in the culture who remain ignorant to how class, race, and colonialism shape and divide us as women.”⁷

Through the focus group discourse, I saw participants’ eyes opened and understandings expanded. As the group discussed the injustices involved in Abram and Sarah’s actions, one participant responded, “they are supposed to be the pillars of our faith.” I asked how many had heard Hagar’s story in the ways that Williams, Gafney, and Weems narrated it. Although those who had engaged in theological education had heard these retellings, none of the participants heard a sermon recounting the proposed possibilities. Hagar was an Egyptian woman and domestic worker. Sarai, Hagar’s employer, was barren. Sarai forced Hagar into a sexual relationship with her husband,

⁶ Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

Abram, for the purpose of conceiving a child for them.⁸ Hagar was a Black woman in desperation who ran away from abusive circumstances. It was then that she encountered God who promised her numerous descendants. She named God as “the one who sees me.”⁹ Hagar became a surrogate without consent, and Black women who find themselves in hopeless situations look to her and trust that God also sees them. I asked what would happen if they truly preached the fullness of Hagar’s story? One focus group participant said that they may not be welcomed into that pulpit again.¹⁰

At the conclusion of the first discussion on womanist biblical interpretation, a few participants expressed how they looked forward to learning what it means to *interrogate the text*. The youngest participant, a woman in her early thirties, said that she was anticipating the process and wanted to encourage those who may have felt uneasy by saying, “God can stand up to this.” One of the oldest participants explained that she had been a part of a tradition that prevented her from thinking about what it meant to “step into Hagar’s shoes.” Others echoed that they had previously focused on Abraham and Sarah, and explored Hagar’s marginalization in ways that a majority of pastors and preachers do.¹¹ The redactors of the biblical text esteem Abram and his son Isaac, from whom God’s promises of land and progeny will flow; and the redactors marginalize the

⁸ Genesis 16:3-4 (NRSV).

⁹ Genesis 16:13 (NRSV)

¹⁰ This participant said the issue would be with talking about rape from the pulpit.

¹¹ To speak of Hagar as being Sarai’s handmaiden without talk of her lack of agency and being raped by Abram is unjust. Hagar was more than the one who bore the child “not of the promise” or the mother of the one who became an ancestor of the Ishmaelites. She was the first human in Hebrew scripture to name God. Such retellings with critical omissions do not do justice to Hagar and other women who are being marginalized, oppressed, and exploited.

Egyptian woman and her son by the way that they narrate their dismissal. The group admitted that they had examined Genesis 16 and 21 through the lens that the redactors intended—being about God’s election of Abram and his offspring.¹²

The session closed with reiterating the challenge to examine scripture through a womanist lens. The conversation was enriching, and it did not feel like we had completed it, so we continued examining Hagar’s story during the following week.¹³ The third goal of the research, utilizing womanist biblical interpretation to stimulate thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts was achieved. The participants practiced using Gafney’s questions and expressed enthusiasm about what it would mean for how they would study, teach, and preach from scripture in the future.

Intersectionality

During week three, the focus group shifted to giving a large part of our discussion time to *intersectionality*.¹⁴ In session two, when we discussed and defined terms pertinent to the subject of womanist theology, the group voiced that my explanations of intersectionality and heteropatriarchy were very helpful in giving them clearer pictures of their meanings. One participant expressed that she thought that “heteropatriarchy only

¹² Delores Williams writes, “The redactors’ aim was to preserve the story of Yahweh’s election and covenant with Abram and therefore with Israel.” Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2013, 17.

¹³ We spent session two focused on Genesis 16 and decided instead of cramming in Genesis 21 that we would focus on it during the following week.

¹⁴ “Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories. Although intersectional theory and activism today are far-flung and embrace a wide variety of people, Crenshaw began with Black women, whose oppression couldn’t be encompassed exclusively with the terms “racism” or “sexism,” if they were framed as an either/or proposition.” Jstor Daily, “Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Intersectional Feminism,” August 1, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/kimberle-crenshaws-intersectional-feminism/>.

referred to white men.” As I worked on the presentation slides on womanist biblical interpretation and prepared to invite the group to exegete Hagar’s situation, it occurred to me that it could be beneficial for the group to acquire a more robust understanding of compounded oppression and privilege. We opened week three with the TEDTalk, “The Urgency of Intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw.¹⁵

After watching Crenshaw’s presentation, one participant said that she found Crenshaw’s “framing” to be useful. Her commentary on the presentation was that until people had the term that Crenshaw coined, they were not able to name it. They needed a frame to see that even though they hired Black men in professional roles and White women in clerical roles, they were not hiring Black women. The intersections matter. The participant went on to explain that until she was introduced to womanist theology, she did not have the framing to name the challenges that she witnessed in her work context at a large technical college in the city of Atlanta. She remarked, “Black women have slipped through the cracks...It [womanist theology] has opened me up, like a flower...the more the rose opens, the more fragrant [it becomes].”

When the group discussed chapter eleven of Renita Weems’ *Just a Sister Away*, it ushered in ease, joy, and vulnerability. They shared real stories and named old wounds. They disclosed insecurities and trauma. Like Weems, participants imagined an entirely different story had Mary of Magdala been chosen to fill Judas’ role as one of the twelve

¹⁵ In this video Crenshaw discusses and models the complexities of how intersecting identities cause certain groups of people to be devalued and disregarded. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality,” filmed at TED Women in 2016 in San Francisco, CA, video, 18:40, https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en).

apostles.¹⁶ What I heard from the group was that in order for women to see themselves as beloved, they need to know that they can be chosen as apostles—not just foot washers, witnesses, or water fetchers. “It makes me feel inferior,” expressed a participant in reflecting on the fact that the twelve apostles were all men. The work it takes to unlearn the patriarchal practices and to learn that Jesus chooses women may be something the heart absorbs, but the mind needs much more time to do so. A participant reflected aloud, “Women were there fasting, praying, and waiting on God, and the men were there rolling dice.” She was referring to how the apostles were casting lots to select the next apostle all the while Mary who had been with Jesus and bore witness to the resurrection was being overlooked. A participant retorted that at least these apostles took the time to choose persons to fill the role through casting lots, “well at my church, *don’t let him be Black and bald!*” We laughed. She alluded to the reality that particular physical characteristics marked heteropatriarchy in her church and seemed to override well-qualified women. The discussion concluded with participants affirming one another’s worth and stories. The group spoke to how intersectional oppression leaves qualified Black women feeling insecure, undervalued, and isolated. Yet, in our togetherness, we cultivated a kind of community and womanist space that exposes the lies and evils of traditional hegemonic Black church leadership and practices.

Sexuality

The focus group schedule showed that we would use Monica Coleman’s *Making a Way Out of No Way* to discuss a womanist perspective of wholeness and salvation. This

¹⁶ See Acts 1:12-26, which is the focus of Weems’ chapter eleven, “The Gospel of Mary,” in *Just a Sister Away*, 171-184.

work proved immensely helpful for my personal and professional applications of womanist theology, but I came to see that it might not be the best fit for those who were new to the area of study. Coleman's work is dense and is for readers who already have a keen understanding of womanist theology and other theological principles. At the conclusion of week four, I realized that the group needed something different from what I had initially planned. Therefore, I moved to the topic that seemed more pressing and relevant to their ministries—sexuality. I made this change after we had a few successful weeks of discussion, and I was on my way towards achieving my research goals. Yet, I knew that to engage with Black churchwomen for eight weeks and not delve into sexuality through a womanist lens would be a disservice to them and womanist scholarship. I assigned excerpts from Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality in the Black Church*. We began the session with the story of Sarah Baartman. Prior to reading Douglas' book, I had not heard of Baartman who was also known as Hottentot Venus.¹⁷ Baartman was taken from South Africa to London, England in the early 1800s to serve as an object of fascination for the white gaze.¹⁸ She was violated, manipulated, and died more traumatized than we will ever know. During that session, we listened to Tamura Lomax, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Michigan State, narrate the horror of Baartman's life and its relevance.¹⁹ Lomax explained how Baartman became a Jezebel figure, and linking the two helped to create a basis for the ways that white colonizers in

¹⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and The Black Church*, 34.

¹⁸ Tamura Lomax, interview with Michael McBride, *Jezebel Unhinged*, October 6, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1804973016266846.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the Americas viewed, exploited, and controlled Black bodies. The focus group participants shared multiple stories about what they were told about what they could and could not wear to church. One participant talked about how women were told not to wear red or yellow attire while participating in worship from the pulpit because these colors were too loud. Another spoke of how she preached in open-toed shoes and a deacon informed her that her shoe choice aroused sexual desires. It was also acknowledged that in a group with a combined membership of over one-hundred-and-fifty years in Black churches, none had heard of Black churchmen being told what they could not wear while leading or preaching.

A participant who is an associate minister at a church that claims progressive values and espouses gender norms told a story. During the altar call at the conclusion of the worship service, a man came forward for prayer. After she prayed for him, he was overcome with emotion and his tears saturated her shoulder. As his body embraced hers and he wept, this woman felt uncomfortable—not because of the man crying—but because of what others looking at the two of them might think. So, she interrupted his outpouring and encouraged him to go and stand with a male minister at the altar. During the session, she expressed regret, “Who am I to send him to another male minister when God’s anointing was flowing through me?” A lesson to be gleaned from her story is that churches that hold narrow beliefs about sexuality and gender limit a woman’s ability to fully live into her calling (and becoming unshackled from such mental limitations takes time).

In part two of Walker’s definition of “womanist,” she gives the definition, “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers

women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually."²⁰ Womanists believe that one's body and emotions are not to be governed by social constructs and cultural norms.²¹ They espouse a belief in justice and liberation for all of creation. Furthermore, to be a womanist is to advocate for the dignity and choices of persons being marginalized by dominant cultures. In this way, womanism accepts queerness. "If one is not willing to openly, forthrightly, and consistently critique heterosexism and homophobia with the same fervor as the critique of sexism, racism, and classism, then perhaps one should not be a 'womanist,'"²² argues Coleman.

The challenge of discussing sexuality with Black churchwomen is that the conversation is layered, and it needs to begin with a discussion of how white-capitalist-heteropatriarchy has mapped its desires onto Black women's bodies. An effect of this has been Black women continuously second-guessing themselves and their callings. They often spend too much time worrying about their bodies and how they will be perceived, what they are communicating, and what the gaze of others is misinterpreting. It was reiterated to me that there was a great need for more conversations and teaching about sexuality, Black women's bodies, and how Black churches treat these bodies. *How do we normalize these discussions?* A participant acknowledged that she and others made mistakes when speaking about sexuality [and by not speaking about it] as church

²⁰ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, xi.

²¹ In reference to Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, Townes writes, "She seeks to provoke Black men and women to enjoy the fullness of their humanity." Townes, "Womanist Theology," 174.

²² Coleman, "Must I Be a Womanist?," 88.

leadership, but she said that because of the work that she was doing in the focus group, she would think and speak differently about it going forward. At the conclusion of the session, another participant asked if we could return to the conversation of homophobia and homosexuality in the Black church. I committed to her and the group to return to further conversation on sexuality within Black churches during week eight.

Autoethnography

At the beginning of the research, I was unsure to what extent I would operate as an engaged facilitator who shared some personal information or as an objective researcher who sought to center on the experiences of participants. It soon became clear that part of the effectiveness of the focus group would depend upon a facilitator who was engaged, vulnerable, and able to offer insight undergirded by personal experiences. Me being a Black clergywoman who had witnessed and navigated the harms of heteropatriarchal hegemony within Black churches was important to the participants. Vanessa Marr writes how womanist methodology requires different frameworks from other research methods.²³ For example, it necessitates womanist epistemology that centers Black life and requires knowing to come from those who have lived within and not just observed from without. It was Marr's work that helped me to see that the womanist methodology needed for this research would include autoethnography.²⁴

²³ Vanessa L. Marr, "Ditchin' the Master's Gardening tools for Our Own: Growing a Womanist Methodology from the Grassroots," *Feminist Teacher* 24, no. 1-2 (2014): 99, <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.24.1-2.0099>.

²⁴ Vanessa L. Marr writes about autoethnography in her essay on womanist methodology and describes it as, "By positioning the researcher as both subject and object of the study—while also inviting the readers as co-participants—the evocative, embodied, and reflective prose allows researcher, reader, and text to collectively bear witness to social, historical, and political 'aspects of their personal experience.'" *Ibid.*, 100-101.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses aspects of autobiography, ethnography, and anthropology.²⁵ In the book, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, various definitions of autoethnography are deliberated, but the authors define it as “cultural analysis through personal narrative.”²⁶ The research engages the external world around the researcher while examining and analyzing the internal reactions to the external.

During the sixth session, the group spent time discussing my peer-reviewed article, “They Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival.”²⁷ This 2021 journal article followed the research that I conducted on the flourishing of Black clergywomen. Through this research, I acquired a deeper understanding of the challenges and trauma that Black women endured in patriarchal hegemonic church culture. I came to see that clergywomen who many perceived to be flourishing were often doing so after enduring problematic circumstances in toxic congregational cultures whose leadership was almost always heteropatriarchal. The results of this research showed that there were Black clergywomen who served in churches that inherited the heteropatriarchal-capitalistic culture of antebellum plantations. Furthermore, a majority of these churches had not interrogated and dismantled the exclusivist and misogynistic systems that they

²⁵ This is a narrowing of the Reed-Danahay definition provided in Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, eds., *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ Alexis Carter Thomas, “They Have Lived to Tell: Black Clergywomen and Stories of Survival,” *PHILLIS: Moving to the Other Side of the Mountain: Black Women’s Resolve in a Moment of Crisis*. Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2021-2022.

had operated under for several decades. Even their leadership hierarchies paralleled those of plantations. There was a leader (often the senior pastor) whose power was aligned with that of an antebellum “master,” who did not do much work, but who grew wealthy from the hard labor of others. There were “overseers” who had the ear and entrusted responsibility of the pastor-master, and often reinforced the traditions and expectations that kept the system functioning. Then there were “the enslaved,” those who labored behind the scenes to keep the church business running but were rarely recognized and valued by others who ranked higher in the church hierarchy. Instead of the parallels between antebellum plantations and Black churches being surprising news to the Black women in the focus group, it affirmed their experiences and provided a different lens through which to examine their contexts.

At the opening of session six, a participant reflected on the content of the article, “I could see it playing out in every church I’ve been in.” Another participant expressed, “I was the slave...it was not until the pandemic happened and I was not able to be in the church building that things changed for me.” She went on to explain how the COVID-19 pandemic changed her feeling of obligation to show up for worship and other church programs. The forced social distancing provided space for enjoying more self-care and assessing her prior rhythms. Another participant revealed, “I was convicted.” She went on to explain that having lupus meant that she would have flare-ups when she internalized stress and put her body in crisis mode. Yet, to her detriment, she continued to give more than she had to give when called upon by her church.

“Do you feel liberated?” asked a participant in the midst of the storytelling. I was caught off guard by the genuine curiosity and admiration in her voice. “Yes, I do.” I then

went on to explain how my decision to leave an unhealthy pastoral staff and to be able to write the truth about it felt liberating. I reiterated that the problem of patriarchal hegemony has to do with a system and not with a particular church, pastor, or denomination. Therefore, I remain aware how it is easy for me to feel liberated while succumbing to the enslavement of the patriarchal hegemony in new spaces and under different guises. Black church heteropatriarchal cultural hegemony is a sick system and the contagion is difficult to live in close proximity to and not be affected [or infected] by it.

Since my article was the topic of discussion during the sixth session, I shared more about my journey towards liberation. I was able to be a “participant learner” through telling personal experiences, and through engaging with theirs in ways that affirmed their feelings and the need for this kind of group. As I think about the fourth goal of this research which entails writing a resource for womanist theological gatherings within churches, I deem it important to have a facilitator’s guide that provides instructions and reference material for the work of autoethnography. It is more than engaging and divulging personal information, but requires a turn inward to process the content, manner, and motives of what and why we share. There were times when I left sessions wondering if I shared too much, but I trusted that the group deserved a certain amount of vulnerability.²⁸ The resource I envision will provide helpful information for communal conversations for congregants who will need guidance on how to journey together and remain hopeful in the midst of difficult congregational circumstances. In

²⁸ This bears witness to my own spiritual growth and liberation. There are times when I would have chosen the facade of piety over authenticity and guarded my words for others.

order for facilitators to be regarded as cultivating a safe, courageous, and vulnerable space, they must model these aspects while knowing how to guide the group away from harmful and incongruous conversations. Dismantling toxic Black church hegemony begins with conversations of authenticity and courage among individuals who share their experiences while they call into question those that impede love, justice, and liberation.

Grandmother Theology

I was incredibly grateful that Dr. Yolanda Pierce accepted my invitation to join session seven of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop as our guest scholar. I purchased her book, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit*, for each member of the group as a token of gratitude for their participation. I assigned three chapters of the book, but most participants read more than what was recommended prior to the session. I selected this book because of its womanist framework and thought-provoking stories that I believed would resonate with the individuals in the group. Prior to the session, I sent Dr. Pierce notes about the vision of the focus group, weekly themes, and participant demographics.

During the introductory session of the focus group, six out of the seven of us shared about how our grandmothers made a positive and significant impact on our lives. Therefore, it seemed relevant to have Dr. Pierce speak about *grandmother theology*.²⁹ She explained that it was a subset of womanist theology and that grandmother theology

²⁹ Pierce describes grandmother theology as, “A subset of rooted in generational wisdom in the way that time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens through which to know and understand God... carries us two or more generations back, to the kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements of older black women who are often invisible in theological discourse, but without whom the American Christian church would cease to exist.” *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit*, (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), xvii.

was not limited to the wisdom of one's grandmother, but it included church mothers, aunties, and other sage women who possessed ways of being and knowing that Black women need for our liberation. The conversations that evening included: letting go of the shame that we were taught, questioning what source material we consider authoritative, the churches' idolization of youthfulness; and what it means to have more "tools" than our foreparents had.

"You write, 'Black women are pulling theological source material from their own lives.'³⁰ Will you speak to what are some signs that show how the Spirit of God may be calling us to do this in our lives?" Dr. Pierce responded to these questions by explaining how discernment and grace are involved in figuring out what source material to consider authoritative. "How do Black churchwomen who cling tightly to the traditions of their elders, yet no longer feel at home in these traditions, live authentically and faithfully while following Jesus?" I asked. When it comes to choosing what traditions to hold onto and those to leave behind, Dr. Pierce encouraged the group to do the messy work of discerning which battles we need to fight. She also urged us not to be afraid to abide in the tension between our spiritual evolving while we hold onto ways of our past that remain meaningful to us. Through sharing personal experiences, our guest provided texture to what it may look like to discern our battles and make difficult decisions. Dr. Pierce emphasized that the process is personal and shared how she does not judge others who are at different places on their journeys. Examples of what these kinds of personal commitments may look like: not singing songs with problematic lyrics; not becoming members of churches that espouse misogynistic, homophobic, or racist practices; and

³⁰ Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House*, 23.

calling out the heteropatriarchal norms in our worship spaces. It is about being committed to our values while not condemning others who do not share them.

Grandmother theology calls our attention to the way that “time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens through which to know and understand God”³¹ through the women and their callings that have been neglected for generations. A participant narrated a memorable story of attending her denomination’s national convention when she was three years old. She gave a short speech to the hundreds of people in attendance. She said that her grandmother boasted to others about her speech. It was later in life that she realized that she spoke from a podium or pulpit that was not open to her grandmother—women were not allowed, but children were. She concluded her story, “We can serve in the kitchen, not in the sanctuary...we can dust the pulpit, but not preach.”

At the end of the seventh session, a participant shared that reading Dr. Pierce’s book was her first positive encounter with the ideas of grandmother theology. She went on to say that her experience of the church mothers was that they complained, nagged, and spewed bitterness. “I only saw the wounds of the elders...how am I to deal?” Dr. Pierce affirmed the participant’s experiences and explained that many of these elders were coping with “their own brokenness.” She responded, “part of healing is to tell our stories, our testimonies. Bearing witness may be the only healing that we may know.” The group expressed gratitude to Dr. Pierce for taking the time to be in conversation with us. The session ended with thinking about the importance of telling our stories, which was a foreshadowing of the assignment for the final session in which we would share

³¹ Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*, xvii.

parts of our stories with one another. Grandmother theology that gave freedom to our foremothers holds within it significant aspects of our identity that supports groundedness and formation for Black churchwomen. Yet, because contemporary women have more tools to dismantle what we have come to see as the patriarchal gatekeeping and misogyny of Black church culture, we must equip ourselves to use them to advance our liberation in the spaces where we were made to flourish.

Storytelling

The eighth and final session opened with the words of the Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas from a panel discussion, “Black Sexuality, the Church, and Living Faith.”³² I envisioned that her words would provide a pathway into continuing the conversation on sexuality in the Black church that was started during session five. Douglas proclaimed that the Black Church is a liberating force that must advocate for those being oppressed. She called attention to the fact that Jesus did not ever speak of homosexuality, but when Jesus did speak of sexuality it was focused on fidelity.³³ After we watched video clips from the panel discussion, the first response came from the participant that requested that the group return to a conversation on sexuality. She asked for scriptural support for what Douglas spoke about and contended that homosexuality was viewed as “an abomination” in scripture. She divulged that her son went through a stage of wearing pink and her high-heel shoes around the house. Adamantly, this participant explained to her son that wearing pink and women’s shoes were not proper for

³² Wake Forest University, “Panel Discussion: Black Sexuality, the Church, and Living Faith - FCC Virtual Training,” *YouTube*, video, 209:19, 16 Nov. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1vYqZMZFsg>.

³³ *Ibid.*

boys. She concluded with the testimony that, “he no longer makes these fashion choices and now wears blue.”

We held space for vulnerable and courageous reflections. Another participant spoke up, “this is where I stop with womanist theology.” She could not reconcile supporting homosexuality with the scriptures that she interpreted as condemning it. Half of the group who seemed to find joy and liberation in womanist theology felt that homosexuality was the point at which they parted with Walker’s definition. I also had been in a similar place not too many years before. The participant, who had been most familiar with womanist theology, pushed back against the previous views that were shared by explaining how people make choices about what parts of scripture they consider authoritative, “scripture was used to oppress and enslave our people.” She spoke of the social constructions of masculinity and femininity and how scripture does not teach that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. Although three of the six women said that they could not support homosexuality, one of them reiterated that it is the Church's job to love and care for non-heterosexual persons.

A highlight of this final session was when one of the participants came out as queer to the group. She shared about trying to “pray it away” and the harm done by churches that had made her feel that something was wrong with her. She described moments when church members tried to divert their children away from sitting next to her. “I have been made to feel woefully unsafe.” She said Douglas’ statement that “*church* is an aspirational term,”³⁴ resonated with her. It is her hope and mine that the people who claim to follow Jesus and gather for worship are embodying a kind of

³⁴ Wake Forest University, “Panel Discussion: Black Sexuality, the Church, and Living Faith – FCC Virtual Training.”

beloved community that pushes back against the status quo and heteropatriarchal hegemonic systems. When the participant read her story, each person offered her kindness and beautiful words. Each expressed apologies for how she has been treated within churches. It seemed that she had become quite accustomed to church people's disagreement with her sexuality that she appeared to be unaffected by this group's previous dissent.

The power of having a conversation about sexuality was significant because many of these women had not taken part in one that challenged their views in respectful and thoughtful ways. A space to learn, to wonder, to listen, and to explore is required for womanist theological formation. I did not change my views overnight, and I know others who have become advocates for justice issues that they were not aligned with in previous seasons of life. Some theological shifts take time and several encounters with different materials and voices to change one's mind. Part of the vision of the Womanist Workshop is one of the means whereby participants become exposed to womanist theology and learn to engage with it. Once they are engaged, they cannot unknow the ways of womanist biblical interpretation nor can they unhear the stories of Black women. The hope is that they accept the challenge of reading and interpreting scripture and life through a new lens even when they are more accustomed to previous ways of knowing and believing that they have been practicing for many years.

As is a central expectation of womanist theology, we took time to center the stories of Black women. Throughout the eight sessions, we came to know one another and hear parts of some of the most significant stories that had formed and harmed us. There were stories of sorrow, joy, violence, and hope. Storytellers told of how they

recognized personal growth and a new willingness to pursue wholeness as a result of our eight weeks together. I was moved by the kind of liberating God-talk in which Black women spoke in ways that they had not felt free to do so in other rooms. Although this chapter is about the results of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop, the truth is that the fullness of the results are yet to be seen. Seeds were sown, watered, and nurtured, and Black churchwomen will continue to tend to their womanist gardens that will delight and nourish them and their communities for years to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

A FRAMEWORK FOR WOMANIST THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

There are two key ideas in Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way* that this research uses as a framework to build a womanist theological resource for Black churchwomen.¹ The first is the idea of "creative transformation." It is understood in process theology as how humans co-labor with God to bring about transformation that enables life and a way forward.² The second is "making a way out of no way." This concept acknowledges that God is the One at work presenting possibilities that involve human will. These possibilities often enable Black women to experience survival and salvation. The research methodology used in this study drew from Coleman's re-imagining of creative transformation in conjunction with process and postmodern womanist theologies. I use Coleman's work to assert that Black women's embodiment of creative transformation is a path to their liberation and salvation, ergo confronting and dismantling patriarchal hegemonic Black church practices.

Coleman describes four components of "making a way out of no way": "(1) God's presentation of unforeseen possibilities; (2) human agency; (3) the goal of justice,

¹ When beginning this research, I had Coleman's text as one of the one from which focus group participants would read excerpts. However, after being with the group and assessing their interests and needs, it seemed more advantageous for me to use Coleman's ideas to build a framework rather than to assign the text for reading. Coleman has been important for my womanist theological formation, and I referred to her work and shared it as suggested reading, but it did not seem as critical to use for those who are still grappling with the basics of womanist theology.

² Coleman notes that creative transformation in womanist theology "embraces the action verbs of teaching and healing to describe the ways that communities live with God and the world." She also uses the language of John B. Cobb Jr. when describing creative transformation as a "call forward." Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 87.

survival, and quality of life; and (4) a challenge to the existing order.”³ While developing the focus group, I kept in mind Coleman’s definition of what it means to “making a way out of no way.” I began with the vision that God might provide possibilities for the women that they had not previously known or considered. As the facilitator, I had to acknowledge that as much as I wanted the group to commit to ways of liberation, I would have to create a space for each participant to make their own decision about whether they would open-mindedly explore the assigned content and critically engage with it. Furthermore, I had to accept that it was not always my role to make God’s possibilities less overwhelming. They would have to continue in the work of being open to new concepts, possibilities, and their agency to question the rooted religious commitments that were unjust and ungodly.

During our focus group sessions, we gave a considerable amount of time to indirectly discussing numbers three and four of Coleman’s definition of “making a way out of no way.” Womanist theology became the tool I used to build the structure that held conversations about “justice, survival, and quality of life.” These womanist-centered conversations about our personal lives, intersectional identities, and ministry contexts, by their very nature, challenged the existing order of what we had known about patriarchy, complementarianism, hermeneutics, and sexuality. I came to see the truth in what other womanists have written about how the absence of self-love significantly affects one’s ability to challenge ecclesial and social norms.⁴ In a world that teaches self-hate for Black

³ The kind of creative transformation that is contextual and particular to the need of the people at that moment. *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴ Kirk-Duggan writes about the love of God that can be seen in Christian scripture, includes love

bodies, blackness, and African culture and spiritualities, to see God as removed from these is to miss many “unforeseen possibilities.” It is difficult to choose liberation and life when one does not deem that they are worthy of either. It appears mystifying to be involved in justice-making and challenging status-quo evils when one does not believe that it is a priority to the God who created them. Moving towards an ethic of womanist creative transformation includes embracing self-love and the belief that one deserves to be free.

Although various theologians have considered creative transformation, Coleman uses the work of John B. Cobb Jr. to discuss what it means to think about creative transformation—a call to embody Christ-like change through a willingness to choose to move forward into new possibilities.⁵ Cobb’s use of “Christ” is not substituted for Jesus nor is it mutually exclusive, “...what I mean by ‘Christ.’ I mean the incarnation of God in the world.”⁶ Coleman defines Cobb’s thoughts of creative transformation by the following characteristics: “(1) contextual and particular, (2) challenging, (3) noncoercive,

of self and neighbor, and how such love confronts oppression, “The paradox of this love is that one must have the capacity to love one’s self to love the neighbor, to see the sacred, the divine image in another regardless of their behavior. This kind of radical love is essential for transforming relations in creation. Loving the neighbor grants the other respect and the responsibility of freedom. Love embodied presses us to respect other individuals and to be good stewards of ourselves and of creation. Relationships become more important than the acquisition of things. Love as an energy of connectivity fuels community that embraces the divine and the human as incarnation personified. When such a love and the resulting relationships are first and foremost in our lives, then envy, greed, hate, fear, anxiety, and self-loathing become trivial and are greatly diminished.” Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Quilting Relations with Creation Overcoming, Going Through, and Not Being Stuck,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism In Religion and Society*, ed. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 176.

⁵ Coleman provides a synopsis of Cobb’s ideas about creative transformation as a way of showing its connection to a postmodern womanist theology. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 85-100.

⁶ Coleman is quoting Cobb. Ibid., 90. John B. Cobb, Jr., “Christian Universality Revisited,” in *Can Christ Become Good News Again*” 85.

and (4) universal.”⁷ Creative transformation is a process that shines light on unfamiliar pathways that Christ beckons people towards while pulling them away from the more popular, acceptable, and well-worn paths that lead to evil and death. For Cobb, the Christ image is a model of transformative change that infuses people with hope—this particular image becomes a universal one. The next sections will show how characteristics of Cobb’s creative transformation were applied to this research.

An aim of the focus group was for Black churchwomen to explore their ministry contexts in order to see how heteropatriarchal traditions and hegemony caused oppression and hindered Christ’s work in their *particular context*. Each participant’s background affected the way they encountered womanist theology. It seemed that exploring womanist theology and reading about the experiences of womanist scholars became more tangible when participants were able to connect it to their particular lived experiences. Each had spent somewhere between 30-50 years in Black churches, and the reading material and discussions stirred up memories that originated in varied contexts. The joys, the pains, and the empowerment that these churchwomen spoke of happened in particular church buildings, in particular Sunday school rooms, and in relationships with particular leaders. Jacquelyn Grant writes that Black women, “... not only are they the oppressed of the oppressed, but their situation represents ‘the particular within the particular.’”⁸ In order to embrace womanist theology, these Black churchwomen had to locate their Jesus and Cobb’s Christ in and through the ways that they had been formed and bore witness to in their particular lives and contexts.

⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁸ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ And Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, ed. by Susan Thistlethwaite (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 216.

The focus group sought to provide opportunities for challenging patriarchal hegemony within each participant's context in ways that were *noncoercive*. We read womanist theologians whose voices and theologies challenged the traditions and comfort that many of them had known. "One reason that creative transformation is not always *felt* as good is because it challenges the status quo."⁹ The theological material that we considered was selected to provide content that could be a catalyst for creative transformation and changing mindsets. The voices, experiences, and theological scholarship were meant to provide new lenses to probe contextual issues that participants may not have realized were causing harm within their churches. This led to discussions and considerations being given to particular ways to most effectively challenge patriarchal hegemonic Black church structures and traditions. We held space for participant disagreement. Some of the truths that certain participants spoke were not true for others, and when there were counterarguments they were presented in a manner that challenged one's traditions or theological purview without demonizing or coercing change. When a participant explained her concern and why she rebuked her son for wearing high heels and pink clothes, another spoke up. This interlocutor challenged the cultural norms around gender expectations by explaining they were social constructions. Most profoundly, she challenged the woman who often used scripture to make her points with the question, "Where in scripture do you see boys should wear blue and girls should wear pink?"

The *universal* element of creative transformation was the one that received the least attention in the research, but the choice was strategic. Generally speaking, Black

⁹ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 89.

churches have a way of holding up the particularity of Jesus—the One who met/delivered/healed/answered their prayers—while also speaking about a universal Christ that meets people across the divides of race, culture, and nationality. In order for many Black churchwomen to engage with womanist theology, it cannot be divorced from *Jesus as the Christ*. For many of them, Jesus is not just a universal image, but God enfleshed, the ultimate Savior and Redeemer. Only in the particularity of this Jesus is Cobb's Christ made universal for many Black churchwomen, which will be further argued later in this paper.

The four key elements of Cobb's creative transformation—contextual/particular, challenging, noncoercive, and universal, have shaped the way that I approached cultivating a space for womanist theological formation. Coleman's use of Cobb's work provided a structure for me to pursue the goals of exploring the needs of Black churchwomen and cultivating a space of critical engagement with womanist theology. These goals were sought with the hope that through theological readings and reflections, Black women would realize that they possess the agency for Christ-like innovation that is needed to confront and dismantle patriarchal hegemonic systems within Black churches. Cobb's elements provided guideposts for introducing womanist theology to Black churchwomen that inhabit traditional worship spaces in a postmodern world that are both in need of creative transformation. The next section will describe how Coleman uses the four key distinctions of Cobb's creative transformation in connection to creating a vision of a postmodern womanist theology.

CHAPTER SIX

HEALING AND TEACHING AS CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

The following is an essay written by a focus group participant who first engaged with womanist theology during the 8-Week Womanist Workshop. The essay's author read this story to the group during the final session.

I wish I could say that I am inoculated from the pox of heteronormativity, but it has in fact caused me great anguish. Alice Walker speaks that to be a womanist one has to have an expression of deep love. It would be unfair to say that the current church is without love - yet some days I have found this love to be a suffocating and violent embrace. Causing me to turn inward for safety, a direct betrayal of my own name and God's design. The damning gravity of whiteness breeds a cacophony of sameness that I feel woefully unqualified to participate in. Via subtleties or crudely stitches words called "the word of God". I have found myself subject to conversion therapy, predatory mentors, orphanship, manipulative alter calls, and unqualified diagnoses that can be treated only with prayer. As the years have passed, I began to settle within myself that the Christian space is not for me. That there is no harbor for me and that I am not called to this collective. Still, I find myself a willful womanist! Not easily deterred in spite of whatever ache I feel.

God has shown me in this small amount of time we have been allotted that there is more to discover in our faith. I am convinced that when we remove the finite ideals established by westernized Christianity, we will unlock the ability to cultivate heaven on earth. Womanist theology is transitioning from books to platforms to conversations in the kitchen. The super churchy person in my head makes note that eight means "new beginnings", but that is what it is for me. As previously mentioned, I had made a deal with God that I was done. Unlike my peers who have had similar conversations resulting in the complete abandoning of their faith - I intended to transition to a Christmas & Easter-only parishioner. Opting to be a good human but wash my hands of the church. Instead, the exact opposite has happened. Not only do I want to continue my theological education (MDiv & Doctorate), but I have also started to develop a language to better advocate for myself and other marginalized souls. This is not a honeymooned declaration but the sober realization that the church needs Black Womxn and it will be us that create and enforce the new rules of engagement. We walking through this free and taking everyone forward with us. I hold myself accountable to no longer JUST make sideline commentary but immerse myself in creating solutions in church leaders and community service, and allowing womanism to filter my everyday responses by asking "how can I be more loving".

I step away from this with more work and wisdom to develop. But I am not grieved as I feel more rooted than I have been in a really long time. My name is Kai.¹ I am a millennial, I am queer, I am a Black Woman, a womanist theologian.

The creative transformation that occurred through the focus group was embodied in the participants engaging with womanist theology through communal theological reflection and storytelling.² The group's processes and methodology encouraged an exploration of the who and the how of a God that "makes a way out of no way." The participant's story shared above is a poignant illustration of how womanist theological formation can open one to unforeseen possibilities of God; and how it can assist one in fighting for survival, justice, and a better quality of life through means that they may not have previously imagined. Engaging with womanist biblical interpretation encouraged participants to consider how a sacred text that they had read most of their lives may have more nuanced meanings; and that Christ might be calling them to interrogate scriptural texts and ministry contexts. The storytelling entailed bearing witness to Christ who had shown up in the past through their ancestors and church communities. These stories contained reminders of how new ways were needed in order to move forward towards creating more faithful and hopeful worship communities. This kind of womanist God-talk leads to asking, what happens when old ways are not working? What happens when congregations continue in traditions, practices, and values that oppress and do harm to

¹ The name of this participant has been changed.

² The focus group sought to teach and model the importance of engaging in congregational life with our spiritual and emotional beings, but as thinking ones. The importance of this experience of inquiring and reflecting is what Yolanda Pierce spoke of when she wrote, "When we are fully present in worship, we participate in a creative theological process daring to raise and answer questions about the nature and reality of God. Theological work cannot simply take place in academic spaces. It is not a dry set of questions to be posed by those who are qualified, those who have a particular set of educational credentials. You do theology in community. And the best theology reflects the cares and concerns of that community." Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House*, 83.

over seventy percent of its membership? The sustainable solutions for these congregations are not found in creating new programming, updating technology, or inviting more women to preach, but it requires a dismantling that must come about through creative transformation. The new way forward is important because Black churches have often found themselves continuing in old ways and pursuing change through “a rearrangement”³ of what has already proved not to work. It is time for new ways and new stories that speak to the flourishing of Black women over and against heteropatriarchal hegemony. It is time for more Black churchwomen to change their minds and embrace creative transformation. A womanist take on “making a way out of no way” illustrates how this might be possible.

This idea of creative transformation held alongside “making a way out of no way,” brings about a nuanced and just understanding that resonates with the lived experiences and contexts of Black churchwomen. Coleman integrates Cobb’s creative transformation and “making a way out of no way,” and explores them through a postmodern womanist lens. She writes, “... a postmodern womanist theology sees creative transformation in acts of teaching and healing. Although postmodern womanist theology de-centers Christology from its concept of creative transformation, it expands upon womanist theories of salvation and Jesus to find a descriptive image of creative transformation.”⁴ Coleman calls the teaching and healing ministries of Jesus ‘salvific work’ that ushers transformation within humans and communities. This means that

³ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 88. “change as a rearrangement.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

salvation—the work that brings wholeness - is encountered through experiences of learning and gaining new understandings of wholeness.⁵

In Black churches, the ministries of teaching and healing are primarily carried out by women. Black churchwomen visit the sick, teach Sunday school, pastor the children's church, serve as primary caregivers for ill and disabled family members, oversee religious formation, and make meals for potlucks and funeral repasses.⁶ This is the case because of the socio-economic conditions and historical expectations of Black women. When writing about growing up in the 1950s, bell hooks explains, "It was a given: smart girls were meant to grow up and become teachers. And smart black girls from poor, working-class backgrounds had two choices: cleaning other folks' houses or teaching school."⁷ Many Black churchwomen have found themselves cleaning the church house and teaching church school. Furthermore, they continue to live into a vocation of teaching and/or healing beyond church walls. These roles become conflated as Black women work as elementary school teachers, attorneys, and food service workers while unofficially serving as counselors, social workers, and evangelists to their clients, colleagues, and church members. Black women have figured out how to embody Christ

⁵ Coleman writes, "Postmodern womanist theology understands salvation as activity, as a kind of changing. The quest for wholeness, health, freedom, and justice involves a combination of God's activity in revealing possibilities that affirm God's vision for the world and the agency of the world." *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶ Chanequa Walker-Barnes writes, "The modern church encourages African-American women to keep others' vineyards, while neglecting their own, in two ways, by venerating Black Women's performance of strength and depending upon women's labor and financial support to maintain the church, without providing equal opportunity for Black women to exercise their gifts in ministerial leadership; and by distorting Scripture in a way that encourages suffering and self-sacrifice among Black women." Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 133.

⁷ hooks, 136.

and do the work of creative transformation through teaching and healing in a variety of jobs.

On the application for the Womanist Workshop focus group, when asked to reflect on ministry involvement and leadership roles, one applicant wrote:

Having entered ministry at the age of 17 as a Vacation Bible School teacher, I realize that was my first leadership position. However, I did not acknowledge or own that calling initially. The Vacation Bible School Director, who was a black woman, was the first to call me a minister as I taught those precious littles about who loved them very much. Those years of teaching Vacation Bible School were both formative and defining. I really began to sense that God was stirring a call to study the Word and share Herstory with the world. Embracing my call was scary. I did not have a lineage of preachers and teachers to look, to glean from nor pattern my life after. *I had no examples, and I accepted the call of ministry during a time when African American church communities were not accepting of women in ministry.*⁸

This applicant's call story speaks to the potential of encountering Jesus and vocation through the ministry of teaching. In the early forms of Black churches, Gilkes explains that even in the most restrictive denominations, women were allowed to serve in teaching roles.⁹ In many churches, this remains true. "Women were quite enterprising in expanding the definition of teaching."¹⁰ They were not always intentionally subversive, but as they sought to be faithful to the God who called them then the boundaries of their callings pushed against the walls of the traditions and doctrines that confined them.

The idea of re-imagining the ministries of teaching and healing as ways of

⁸ Early in life, I thought that there were very few examples of Black women preaching and teaching, yet, I came to see that was not so. It was just that I was a part of a larger community that had little exposure to Black clergywomen who were prominent in other communities, cities and denominations.

⁹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

creative transformation and liberation for Black churchwomen emerged from my study.¹¹ I would like to create a resource that encourages Black churchwomen to live faithfully and fully into these ministries beyond the traditional modes that have been widely modeled. Two focus group participants who served for the past eight to ten years as associate ministers were primarily teachers in their congregations (both within the children's ministry and one also within a prison ministry). Numerous times, they were invited to participate in worship through reading scripture and offering prayers. Neither had been asked to preach from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. I believe most Black churches need more women preaching on Sundays. Yet, I am also convinced that they need more Black churchwomen teaching. Through the focus group, I sought to empower women to re-imagine their teaching roles as vehicles for disrupting the patriarchal hegemony of their churches. Black churchwomen must continue to be learners, liberators, and testimony givers no matter what roles they occupy. Through these actions, they become storytellers and noncoercive teachers illuminating lessons and truths that open doors for meeting Christ in creative and transformative ways. It is then more people will experience positive change and healing. Therefore, the teaching role for Black churchwomen becomes a vital means for liberating and healing themselves and others.

In postmodern womanist theology, Jesus' actions of restoration and inclusion become a model for the kind of creative transformation that brings about healing. "The Synoptic Gospels represent Jesus dining with sinners, healing lepers, and teaching women. These are all acts of welcoming the marginalized of society into fellowship.

¹¹ Sometimes oppressed people must create roles that do not exist in the societies that oppress them, and sometimes they must radically reorganize the content of roles that already exist. In the African American experience, such innovation and resistance has been a response to the constant pressure to devise 'a way out of no way'." Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 143-144.

Jesus' inclusion and acts of hospitality are acts of healing."¹² An example can be seen in the story of Mary of Bethany recorded in Matthew 26.¹³ Through pouring ointment on Jesus, she interrupts the socio-economic-gendered expectations of Jesus's followers.¹⁴ It is Mary whose extravagance and prophetic act are said to prepare Jesus for his burial. Jesus' affirmation of Mary—a woman who did not belong in that setting and acted against societal norms—models a way forward. In that teaching moment, Jesus was healing death-dealing ideas about power, exclusivity, and worthiness. It is time for the patriarchal hegemony of Black churches to change their minds about the ways they view and use the bodies of Black women. For centuries, these same churches have been bearing witness to Jesus' healing and teaching through women and non-heteronormative bodies. These bodies possess powerful lessons that bring greater wholeness to communities.

A key element of Coleman's creative transformation through a postmodern womanist theological lens is that it must be communal.¹⁵ The teaching and healing may be contextual, yet they are universal in ways that make salvation possible for the whole.

¹² Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 95.

¹³ Matthew 26:6-13 (New Revised Standard Version): "Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

¹⁴ Emmanuel Katongole writes, "I believe Mary represents the "rebel consciousness" that is essential to Jesus' gospel. Wherever the gospel is preached, we must remember that its good news will make you crazy. The good news of God's kingdom will force you to question social norms. Jesus will put you at odds with the economic and political systems of our world. This gospel will force you to act, interrupting the world as it is in ways that make even pious people indignant." Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 116.

¹⁵ Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way*, 97-100.

Kai's story becomes one of teaching and healing that is communal and salvific for her and others. In the focus group, those who could not understand nor support her sexuality came to esteem her without knowing about the fullness of her identity. Therefore, when she announced that she identified as queer, some participants were forced to wrestle with their hermeneutics and how they experienced God at work in and through her. It is through the gathering of the focus group and exploring womanist theology that Kai comes to realize that being in fellowship with people of God and living into a story that counters the painful stories that she finds a deeper desire for a worshiping community and for theological education. The hope is that this kind of unexpected disruption in womanist theological spaces causes those present to wrestle with the heteropatriarchal norms and beliefs endorsed within their contexts.

For Black women, creative transformation has often emerged from suffering. The suffering can be an evil teacher and even a beneficent savior. Black churchwomen have channeled their suffering into challenging status quos and fighting for justice. From the cotton fields on plantations to the courtrooms where victims lacked juries of their peers, Black women have cried and spoken out against the prominent violence and agonies they witnessed in their communities. Ida B. Wells experienced a personal loss as a result of a lynching in Memphis in 1892. She became outspoken about the brutality of lynching and advocated for justice and the universal dignity of Black people. She used investigated journalism and her understanding of intersectionality to confront racism and sexism. Activist and community organizer, Fannie Lou Hamer spoke out against the discriminatory abuses that she witnessed in Mississippi in the 1960s. In 1963, Hamer and

other activists were arrested and brutally assaulted at the Winona County Jail.¹⁶ In 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was created by Hamer and other reformers to combat persecution and register voters. Hamer diligently fought for socio-economic justice, and her work enriched the lives of many in rural Mississippi (and it continues to do so for many who learn from her work). Church mother and activist, Mamie Till-Mobley endured terror and heartbreak when her fourteen-year-old son, Emmett Till, was lynched in August 1955 in Money Mississippi. She refused to suffer passively. Although her son's murderers were not convicted, Till-Mobley successfully challenged an unlawful system and called universal attention to the widespread horror of her particular experience.¹⁷ Mamie Till-Mobley is an example of the creative transformation that invites communal disruption, action, and grief through the hope that teaching and healing might occur. Through the lives and sufferings of Wells, Hamer, and Till-Mobley, they created a way out of no way—and a way of salvation for others who might learn from and be saved by their activism.

To believe that Christ *is* creative transformation is to use one's resources, gifts, and voice to co-create new possibilities that bear witness to good and new ways forward. The vision of this work and the focus group are my efforts to do this—to share the liberating and saving power of womanist theology with other Black churchwomen whose minds might open to meet Christ in new ways. Many will resonate with how I described

¹⁶ To learn more about the life and work of Fannie Lou Hamer, see Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck, eds. *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

¹⁷ Karen Baker-Fletcher, "More than Suffering: The Healing and resurrecting Spirit of God," 160.

myself in the opening of this paper—unaware of the need for new language and lenses to speak about and view God. Encountering womanist theology changed my mind and gave me what I needed to see the harms and limitations of patriarchal hegemony. Furthermore, the patriarchal hierarchies in Black churches oppress Black churchwomen who do most of the labor without proper support. When many Black churchwomen see patriarchy as godly and biblical, talk of liberation is fatuous if there is no process of dismantling the current hegemonic culture.

Womanist theology is a method whereby Christ uses healing and teaching to bring salvation to Black churchwomen. Exploring creative transformation through postmodern womanist theology calls Black churchwomen to witness God's opening up of new possibilities, to make radical moves that confront the status quo, prioritize justice, and a good quality of life.¹⁸ This can be seen historically in the lives of numerous Black churchwomen. Examples include Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Mamie Till-Mobley. Through critically engaging with their contexts and womanist theology, the women of the 8-Week Womanist Workshop experienced how healing and teaching possess power to liberate and save from harm. Although at differing levels, the closing session and final evaluations submitted show that each member of the research's focus group reconsidered how Christ might be teaching, healing, and calling them. It was expected that creative transformation would look different within the lives of the women and their distinct contexts. In the next section, I explore how Black churchwomen's views of Christ can be expanded while starting with a Christocentric theology, and that

¹⁸ These are elements of Monica Coleman's "making a way out of no way." Monica Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way*, 33).

this may even be necessary for them to take further steps towards creative transformation. How might they envision that the God-talk that liberates is a conversation that is not done apart from Christ, but where he is a key conversation partner? I propose that although many Black churchwomen embody aspects of Coleman's postmodern womanist theological creative transformation, a widespread acceptance of the vision will not be possible unless there is space for women to co-create in ways that maintain the centrality of Christ

CHAPTER SEVEN

A MOVE TOWARDS CO-CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

I knew there would be challenges that would emerge during the research focus group, but I was not prepared for how to implement solutions for the most substantial ones. Monica Coleman's discussion of process theology's creative transformation and womanist theology's "making a way out of no way,"¹ provided me with the tools and materials to construct a pathway for Black churchwomen to move toward counter-hegemonic mindsets and practices that center womanist theology. Womanist theology will not set Black churchwomen free just by their mere engagement with it. When one's vision of Jesus is limited to the images and ideas that Black churches make their bedrock—based on traditionally narrow readings of Scripture—then experiencing Jesus in new and liberating ways may be a nearly impossible recourse. This brings us to two key realities that take the form of challenges for Black clergywomen who have received formal theological training.² For womanist theology to gain success among the masses of Black churchwomen, these two issues must be addressed: 1. Possessing a theology that is not Christocentric is almost never an option in most Black churches; and because of this

¹ In *Making a Way Out of No Way*, Monica Coleman writes, "A postmodern womanist theology sees creative transformation in acts of teaching and healing. Although postmodern womanist theology de-centers Christology from its concept of creative transformation, it expands upon womanist theories of salvation and Jesus to find a descriptive image of creative transformation," 94-95.

² "First, a commitment to teaching womanist theology not just in seminaries and universities but also in churches and community-based organizations and groups is essential. Appropriate pedagogies for teaching church and community-based women need to be developed as a part of the womanist theological praxis. New ways to communicate and teach womanist theology that grow out of the various contexts in which black women are a part have to be devised. No doubt, these pedagogies will emerge as womanist theologians become immersed in the varied lives and contexts of black women." Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ: Vol. 25th Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 77, Ebscohost: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2014782&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

2. Many members of Black churches are not prepared to engage with a postmodern and pluralistic world. A truncated Christocentric purview is not enough to flourish in a world that is Christ-filled. It is a world in which our neighbors, co-workers, and community's issues are often not Christocentric. Therefore, I propose a way forward for Black churchwomen who want Jesus, salvation, and wholeness. A Christocentrism that repels heteropatriarchal Black church hegemony while inviting co-creative transformation. A vision that is counter-hegemonic and allows a Christocentric view that is expansive and wholistic. Furthermore, it is a vision that helps Black churchwomen to be more aware, relevant, and capable of engaging with the world that Christ loves. A method of study that helps Black women to see that Christ is more than many of us were told that Christ could be. It is nearly impossible to reach for the counter-hegemonic ideas and practices of womanist theology if one is bound by the hegemonic cords of Black churches. How do womanist theologians provide teaching and healing for Black churchwomen who know a myopic Christocentrism? *We work within it. We trust that Jesus can liberate them from within it.*

There is thought among womanist theologians that if one cannot embrace the entire four-part definition of Walker's "womanist," then she is not fit to claim the identity. It is not my aim to contest this, yet it is my hope to argue that becoming a womanist can be a journey in which dismantling and constructing new beliefs can happen concurrently. Changing one's mind and experiencing liberation are processes that happen over time. How do we encourage a more expansive and faithful witness to Christ through the lives and bodies of Black women? We lean into what they already know and believe:

Jesus' maleness is not essential to his Christological nature.³ If Jesus' maleness does not affect Jesus' ability to be Christ, then perhaps it can be shown that other humans' sex and sexuality do not affect their abilities to embody Christ.

It is important to address the first issue because if accepting the universal Christ and de-centering Jesus are critical to a postmodern womanist theology, then it will not be a pathway of liberation and empowerment for a majority of Black churchwomen. The ideas of creative transformation and postmodern womanist theology that do not require the work of Jesus as Christ have the power to liberate Black churchwomen. However, multitudes will never hear the call through womanist theology because in many Black churches womanist theology is deemed as unorthodox and unbiblical. In order for something to exist as good news for many Black churchwomen, it must provide a way forward that is able to engage those who have a Christocentric theology, and then move towards non-coercive challenges that draw attention to the particular patriarchal hegemonic practices within their contexts. It is after this is done then they might be open to the universal possibilities and applications. The necessity of a universal connection being made through womanist theology can be seen through Jacquelyn Grant's words, "To speak of Black women's tri-dimensional reality [race, class, and gender], therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which connects them with others. Likewise, with Jesus Christ, there was an implied universality

³ "Since Christology has been done in the context of patriarchy, what is the significance of the person of Christ, that is the maleness of Jesus, in a patriarchal society? Does the person assume male personality as we understand what it means to be male in a patriarchal society? In the light of feminist questions about patriarchy itself, feminist Christology has two tasks. First, feminist Christology must show how traditional male articulated christologies have been used 'to keep women in their place,' rather than to save women. And second, feminist Christology must provide constructive means for the liberation of women by the way of the liberation of Jesus from oppressive and distorted interpretations." Grant, *White Women's Christ And Black Women's Jesus*, 82.

which made him identify with others—the poor, the woman, the stranger.”⁴ The hope is that Christ becomes envisioned as more expansive through their healing and teaching experiences. It is here that I offer up a move towards a *co-creative transformation* for Black churchwomen.

Coleman’s coupling of “making a way out of no way” with creative transformation provides a theology that encourages an individual to do more than just wait on God to move on their behalf. It is not enough to believe that God will make a way—humans are called to join in co-creating that way through their good actions that challenge the systems that have failed to be open to new ways of pursuing “justice, survival, and the quality of life.”⁵ I define *co-creative transformation* as one in which the human subject and Jesus the Christ are working at on-going liberative change. This approach centers images of Jesus that have become dear to many Black churchwomen—Son of God, Suffering Servant, Redeemer, Savior, and Intercessor.⁶ While it also encourages Black women to engage with Jesus through prayer, study, reflection, and action in new ways.⁷ This co-creative vision offers womanist theologians a way to address the challenges of a myopic Christocentrism and lack of thoughtful engagement

⁴ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ And Black Women’s Jesus*, 217.

⁵ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 94.

⁶ “In the experiences of Black people, Jesus was ‘all things.’ Chief among these however, was the belief in Jesus as the divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of oppression. For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they.” Jacquelyn Grant, *Black Women’s Jesus and White Women’s Christ*, 212.

⁷ This co-creative approach invites Black churchwomen to engage in more intentional connection with Christ and the words of Scripture through: *lectio divina*, expansive liturgy, contemplative prayer, storytelling, and engaging resources outside of theology in popular culture.

with a world beyond the Black church. Black women can hold onto Jesus, scripture, and their stories while examining them through new lenses. Moreover, they can receive comfort in knowing that Christ is with them in the process and illuminating new ways to view oppression and liberation (specifically around patriarchal Black church cultural hegemony). This co-creative vision does not mean a theological overhaul or dismantling structures after one discussion or reading, but it invites undertaking a process of addressing the two challenges named at the opening of this chapter.

Co-creative transformation has the potential to aid Black churchwomen in witnessing Christ at work through the postmodern and womanist theologies that they have been taught to be skeptical of and fear. Unless they feel some sort of safety in stepping into these murky waters, they will never feel comfortable wading through them. Black women accepting invitations into these waters will require that Christ does the beckoning and not only womanist theologians. An aim is for salvation to become about wholeness and less about a confession, event, or future ideal of heaven. It is in this co-creative transformation that “salvation comes from perpetuating the saving activity of Jesus.”⁸ When Black women’s minds are changed through Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing then their families and communities will be changed. When this occurs, anti-womanist and heteropatriarchal ecclesiologies and theologies will begin to be dismantled and more congregations will have liberation models. Also, there will be new ways that depart from focusing on calling Black churchwomen to identify with Christ’s suffering,

⁸ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 95.

and not into his liberation.⁹ Where will this lead? To a greater possibility for understanding Christ as a figure that transcends the myopic Christocentrism and traditional hegemonic ways of Black churches.

The co-creative transformative process is envisioned in four steps that respond to the first challenge by beginning with Jesus the Christ and seeing Jesus as the one who invites us to take up the second issue.¹⁰ The four steps of the co-creative transformation process are: Exploration, Engagement, Consideration, and Action. The following sections seek to provide a description of each stage and explain how addressing these challenges provide a greater possibility for a womanist theology as a counter-hegemony within Black churchwomen.

The **exploration** phase begins with reading texts that introduce womanist theology. It calls for learning the histories of harm and the need for a theology that allows for the intersectionality of Black women to take up space. A part of exploration includes an introduction to womanist biblical readings so that the text that an individual considers sacred can be read in new and unfamiliar ways. In the focus group, it was when the women were exposed to reading about Hagar and Mary in a manner that they had not been provoked to do previously that they sensed new possibilities for understanding and exegeting scripture.¹¹ This process ignited changes in their minds. Although the participants might not have been aware at the time, our focus group was co-creating with

⁹ “For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them...Their crucifixion included rape, and babies being sold.” Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 212.

¹⁰ Challenge 2: Many members of Black churches are not prepared to engage with a postmodern and pluralistic world.

¹¹ See Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 38-45. See Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 171-184.

God by showing how old stories might transform us in new ways. An individual is ready to move to the second phase after she has a foundational understanding of key concepts of womanist theology (i.e., its history, womanist biblical interpretation, centering Black women's stories, wholeness, how it differs from feminist theology).

The **engagement** process consists of discussions about what emerged during the exploration process. It requires communal conversations. This stage encourages conversations that are rooted in topics that womanist theology addresses, and it is both structured and organic. Engagement involves Black women sharing their spiritual journeys and church experiences with one another. In order to increase the effectiveness of engagement and possibilities of transformation, this process should be facilitated by someone steeped in the subject of womanist theology. During the focus group, I showed video clips of Canon, Douglas, Weems, and Williams telling personal stories and speaking about theological principles. Dr. Yolanda Pierce shared about the impact of grandmother theology on the lives of Black churchwomen. Participants were asked to engage with womanist theology through a variety of voices. The hope was that they would hear echoes of their stories that are rooted in shared histories and come to see that many before them have co-created work that would empower them to engage with Jesus through new lenses.

In the **consideration** phase, Black churchwomen are asked to consider how the content that they engaged has *direct connections to their lives and contexts*. It is the “so, what?” phase. How does she move from seeing Jesus as deliverer, teacher, and healer, to also envisioning Christ inviting her to co-create new things? But not necessarily brand new, perhaps contextually new. This phase does not involve a dismissal of Jesus, but an

introduction to the more expansive ways that Christ teaches, heals, and speaks to Black women experiencing the harms of patriarchal hegemony in Black churches. This stage asks participants, “How might you be called to co-create a future that transforms the possibilities of Black churchwomen by exorcizing patriarchal hegemonic forces from tormenting them? How is Jesus calling you to lead/preach/minister in ways that heal the white supremacist wounds within your Black church?” For example, some participants will need a reminder that many ancestors of African Americans were syncretists who practiced the traditions and invoked the spirits of the religions of their homelands while clinging to the liberating God of the Exodus event (and not the entirety of scripture). Perhaps churchwomen will give consideration to worship practices and liturgical choices that are not Eurocentric. These ancestors followed Jesus in a way beyond what colonized Christianity told them was legitimate. As Jacquelyn Grant writes, “To locate the Christ in Black people is a radical and necessary step, but an understanding of Black women’s reality challenges us to go further.”¹² Going further might look like having a brief survey of world religions by a scholar in the field. Learning about the faiths of others would provide participants with knowledge, clarity and enlarge their worldviews beyond a western Jesus. The phases of engaging, exploring, and considering move Black churchwomen towards considering a universal Christ who can be encountered in innumerable ways in a postmodern and pluralistic world. One aspect of considering the sphere of womanist theological formation leads to deciding the right actions to pursue as a result of what has emerged during the process.

¹² Grant, *White Women’s Christ And Black Women’s Jesus*, 217.

The fourth phase of co-creative transformation is **action**. To re-imagine a new way forward to challenge the status quo and confront the hegemonic powers is necessary, but it cannot be the telos of this work. There must be thoughtful consideration that leads a community to ask, “what now?” The action does not have to focus on care for Black churchwomen. Taking notes from Coleman’s concept of “making a way out of no way,” I posit that this stage requires human agency to work towards wholeness and justice. This phase invites participants to discern how God might be calling them to confront patriarchal hegemony through teaching and healing. What ways can they use their power? Could Sunday School be used as a space for teaching womanist biblical interpretation? For some churches, hosting an interfaith dialogue within the community may be a needed action. A good place to start may involve giving time during prayer meetings to seek God for a new way forward and for courage to pursue transformation. Outreach and mission ministries could commit to efforts that contribute to repairing the harm done by patriarchal hegemonic forces in their communities. Or churches could collaborate with organizations that are attending to suffering through teaching and healing like the women mentioned in Chapter 3 (Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Mamie Till-Mobley). It is through thoughtful and meaningful action that Christ can become universal. As Coleman writes, “Salvation is universal in that all human beings, living things, and nonliving things may experience it.”¹³ The action phase aims to ensure that Black churchwomen do not become reservoirs of womanist theology where they create exclusive or elitist small groups that engage, explore, and consider, but stop short of actualizing their commitments.

¹³ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 94.

I introduced the idea of co-creative transformation as a method for tackling two major obstacles that I encountered during the 8-Week Womanist Workshop. First, the need for an immutable image of Jesus to be central to one's theology; and therefore, an inability to engage with a world that does not center Jesus. Co-creative transformation becomes a means whereby human minds are being changed and expanded over time by being in an ongoing relationship with Jesus. The 8-Week Womanist Workshop illuminates the liberative and saving power of Christ—not just for Black churchwomen or their churches, but for all of creation. Through exploring new texts, ideas, and conversations, the hope is that it becomes clear that Jesus is not a part of white supremacist culture nor the Black church patriarchy. Nor does Jesus take lightly how these oppressive systems demonize Black women. There must be a re-orientation to Jesus to truly accept that he is for the freedom and wholeness of Black women—and all of humanity. The need to gain insights into our pluralistic world is ever increasing. A co-creative process uses a womanist methodology and pedagogy that invites questions and expansive ways of viewing Christ's work in the world through Black churchwomen. It is a hope that they will see that the Black patriarchy does not have a monopoly on Christ and righteous living. Participants who embark on the journey of co-creative transformation must be asked to reconsider their stories, their Jesus, and their contexts with the intention that they might be transformed into more just, knowledgeable, and thoughtful beings. Introducing womanist theology in conjunction with a co-creative process has the potential to liberate Jesus and Black churchwomen from patriarchal hegemonic Black church theology and cultural practices.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CONCLUSION

Womanist theologians must resist the urge to retreat behind the walls of seminaries and universities. The womanist black Christ demands that we remain involved in the lives of “ordinary” black women in the church and in community organizations and groups. This is crucial primarily because the wisdom gained from these women should eventually empower these very women in their struggle for life and wholeness. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, it is black women's everyday “taken-for-granted” knowledge that womanist scholars should rearticulate in such a way that it “empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance.”¹

-Kelly Brown Douglas

The 8-Week Womanist Workshop was an experiment in exploring whether womanist theology could cause Black churchwomen to change their minds about the patriarchal hegemonic leadership and culture within Black churches. I cultivated a communal space for womanist theological formation with the goals of opening eyes, changing minds, and producing actions that call into question misogynistic leadership that does harm to Black churchwomen. Antonio Gramsci's theory of counter-hegemony provided a framework for how womanist theology could be a way of liberation. The scholarship of Monica Coleman that links process theology and postmodern womanist theology helped me to re-imagine womanist theological formation for women in Black churches. Coleman and many womanist theologians provided me with the tools that could be used for empowering Black women to dismantle structures that have been destructive to them for centuries while also for building new ways of thinking about God

¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ: 25th Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019), 20.

and understanding ourselves.² As Douglas' words in the opening quote express, womanist theology necessitates that Black churchwomen in the pews be empowered "in their struggle for life and wholeness."³

The four key goals of the research study were achieved to some extent, I introduced a group of Black churchwomen to womanist theology as a counter-hegemonic movement against patriarchal Black church hegemony; explored the needs and interests of Black churchwomen that align with womanist theology; cultivated a space for connection, theological study, and critical engagement with womanist thought; and stimulated thoughtful theological reflection around calling and ministry contexts through a womanist lens and womanist biblical interpretation. Concerning the fifth goal, I began the process of creating a womanist theological resource for the formation of Black churchwomen, *but I have yet to develop it*. During my research study, I realized that I needed to focus on the first four goals and give more time to gathering information rather than figuring out how to share it through a resource.

The 8-Week Womanist Workshop was a successful experiment on a small scale. There were no cataclysmic actions that resulted from it. Like much of the work of theological formation, the fruit comes in time. Six Black churchwomen engaged, explored, and applied womanist theology. They experienced scholarship and empowerment and learned what it means to interrogate scripture. Once their minds are changed, it is essential that they understand the tools and responsibility of assisting others in moving towards a creative and collective liberation. The focus group demonstrated that

² It [the term *creative*] also reminds us that this change emerges from grasping that which the past alone does not suggest. It surprises us; it amazes us; it is something we might not have seen on our own. It is amazing and creative." Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 92-93.

³ Douglas, *The Black Christ: 25th Anniversary Edition*, 20.

creative transformation and “making a way out of no way” often begins with Christ meeting people in their particular contexts through “unforeseen possibilities.” Sharing personal stories, affirming one another, and wrestling with unfamiliar and uncomfortable ideas changed how they view their callings, context, and God.

The 8-Week Womanist Workshop educated me in regards to which themes may be important to feature in a resource for womanist theological formation. The themes of womanist biblical interpretation, storytelling, intersectionality, sexuality, and grandmother theology provided the foundation for a new home that I asked participants to consider moving into while simultaneously inviting them to imagine dismantling the old patriarchal hegemonic structures within their churches. Employing autoethnography helped me serve as an engaged and credible facilitator that provided comfort and reassurance to Black women who tried to find footing while journeying in unfamiliar places. Autoethnography provided clarity of the areas that I needed to further explore and the work that I must do to better support the liberation and flourishing of Black churchwomen. The centrality of storytelling marked a way for participants to enter the conversation on womanist theology and to value each individual brought to the group. They learned a great deal about each other and themselves. Each person came with valuable stories from their pasts and left with the possibility of a more liberated future.

I note the importance of providing explicit examples and methods of how to practically do the work of dismantling patriarchal hegemonic practices within their contexts. I was not as clear about this as I could have been, because I had an unrealistic hope that the participants would make the connections and take the necessary steps on their own. I wanted to serve as a model of what could be done, but I did not want others

to have myopic views about what disrupting or dismantling might look like. Reiterating examples that show how teaching and healing can produce creative transformation in their contexts would have been beneficial (e.g., introducing new ideas while teaching Sunday School or Bible study; using feminine language and imagery in their teaching, preaching, and praying). Perhaps I missed an opportunity to affirm the multiplicity and expansiveness of this work because it seemed overwhelming without tangible steps or practical assignments to connect the ideas to praxis.

I introduced Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality in the Black Church* to Black churchwomen who struggled to embrace its concepts. I speculate that if the focus group had spent four to six weeks examining relevant texts and discussing scriptures that are often used to justify a stance against homosexuality, there would have been greater wrestling and transformation. Our discussion was not substantial enough, and many of the questions keeping them from expanding their views on sexuality were unanswered. I had some of their same questions not that long ago. Knowing what I know now, I would have had a womanist theologian who understood their backgrounds and contexts present during one of the sessions on sexuality in the Black church. In creating a womanist theological resource for Black churchwomen, I suggest having an introductory womanist workshop of six to eight weeks, and then a second-level workshop of four to six weeks that focuses on Black bodies and sexuality in Black churches. I cannot guarantee that this approach would have had a higher level of creative transformation or embracing of Walker's four-part definition, but I surmise there would have been more engagement and change concerning their thoughts about womanist theology and the patriarchal and misogynistic practices of Black churches.

Some participants found it easy to express their disdain for certain theological practices and modes of sexuality while they held onto a strong belief in liberation and desire to dismantle patriarchal hegemony. They clung to some scriptures that proclaimed liberation for those being held captive, and they sometimes clung tighter to scriptures endorsing homophobia and rigid forms of “holiness.”⁴ While they did not see anything wrong with viewing scriptures that advocate for the submission of women and complementarianism as archaic and not applicable to them, half of the group continued to think of homosexuality as sin. As one participant put it, “God says it is an abomination.” There were participants whose churches adhere to heteropatriarchal normality in ways that do harm and hinder the liberation of their members.

It is much easier to maintain womanist ideals in theory or to agree with parts of Walker’s four-part definition than it is to embody the essence of womanist theology that arises from it. Furthermore, it takes time to learn womanist theology and unlearn the heteropatriarchal hegemonic [and white supremacist] beliefs and practices that have been a crucial part of the theological formation of many Black churchwomen. This kind of learning and unlearning is best done in community. The study shows how one’s context and Black church experiences shape one’s theology, biblical interpretation, and views on sexuality. Ongoing womanist theological formation is critical in countering Black church hegemony and changing the minds of Black churchwomen. Also, embracing the concepts

⁴ Yolanda Pierce writes about traditional ideas of Black church “holiness,” and calls readers to re-imagine the connotation of the laden term: “Holiness demands neither a dress code nor a list of rules. The open Communion table is holy because all, regardless of status, creed, or color, are welcomed. The spontaneous fellowship that happens when two or three saints gather is holy, because no formal program is needed to worship God. The laughter and joy of a full dinner table are holy, because we are called to nourish both body and spirit. Holiness draws us closer to God, to each other, and to our innermost selves. Holiness requires grace, not the shackles of legalism. To be holy as God is holy is to imitate the love of God in all that we do.” Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*, 19.

of intersectionality and grandmother theology can prove helpful in this process.

Womanist theologians really do have the power to revolutionize Black churches. Their scholarship and willingness to translate it into pragmatic pedagogy for those in the pews are what hold the possibilities of liberating Black churchwomen who have long been bound to patriarchal hegemonic theology and religious practices. The scholarship exists, but its connection to those in the pews does not. There is a dire need for womanist theology to connect with those whose Christology is central and whose worldviews are narrow. Black churchwomen who know Jesus as the Christ, but who do not know Christ beyond what the Black patriarchy says that he is are stuck. It will take the teaching and healing ministries of Christ through Black women to change minds set formed by Black church hegemony. The story that Kai shared with the focus group demonstrated the kind of transformation and hope for what is possible through the 8-Week Womanist Workshop, and the dire need for womanist theology among Black churchwomen in the pews.

Liberation will take co-creative work between womanist theologians, Christ, and Black churchwomen to confront and prepare a church that is committed to Christ and can have relevant good news for a pluralistic world. One way is to consider healing and teaching in ways that fit into Cobb's vision of creative transformation as contextual, challenging, noncoercive, and universal. The work yet to be done has to have good news for Black women and for non-Black churchwomen. This means preaching the good news that says patriarchal hegemonic leadership is not Christ-like and that Christ offers wholeness and life-giving power to all - not just in Black churches. Coleman writes, "It [the term *creative*] also reminds us that this change emerges from grasping that which the

past alone does not suggest. It surprises us; it amazes us; it is something we might not have seen on our own. It is amazing and creative.”⁵ Black church hegemonic practices reproduce historical systems of oppression that continue to exploit Black women for labor - they are not creative, they do not amaze us... they are not enough.

A womanist theological formation for women in the pews means reading new materials (not only Christian scripture), re-reading scripture in new ways, and using a hermeneutic of suspicion as a corrective lens that allows for a clearer picture of God at work in and through their context (and even beyond it). Black churchwomen have read, memorized, and prayed scripture. Yet, many are still depressed, disenfranchised, and dependent on an oppressive system that refuses to heal them. Through the work of Christ, God has invited Black churchwomen to co-create ways of justice, survival, and quality of life that center wholeness. It is now time for womanist led engagement, exploration, consideration, and action - of Black churchwomen co-creating with Christ. This co-creative process is meant to shine light in the areas that church hegemony has cautioned Black women not to look because doing so may interfere with many churches' agendas (e.g. ensuring Black women are subjugated, productive, and follow the ways of the patriarchal hegemony). The resource that I am developing will provide a new way forward that “challenges the existing order:”⁶ to challenge toxic traditions through reading scripture and, taking Pierce’s advice, to resist through telling stories and leaving spaces that cannot welcome the fullness of our being.

Womanist theology brings good news to Black churchwomen who have

⁵ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 92-93.

⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

experienced Black churches as wilderness spaces for too long. During session three, before we discussed Hagar's story, I posed the opening reflection, "*How has God met you in the wilderness? What name would you assign to God based on your experience of God in the wilderness?*" One participant responded, "I am still in a wilderness." Then she wept and could not speak any more words. We sat with her in silence. She later expressed that her experience in church leadership had many points of harm and pain. This research has been a reminder that womanist theology and the God of scripture still see Black women who are in wilderness places - even when those places are their beloved churches. The faith they possess says that the God who "made a way out of no way," for Hagar will be the God who will make a way out of no way for you. This God is the one who is willing to co-create with Black churchwomen to liberate them from oppression that has made their places of worship into places of wilderness and trauma. There must be more options than to stay, to simply survive, or to leave it all behind. The 8-Week Womanist Workshop envisions learning communities for Black churchwomen to be seen, encouraged, and equipped to navigate the wilderness of their churches. For most, the journey out of the wilderness will be much longer. Over time, through exploration, engagement, consideration, and action, Black churchwomen might change their minds as they meet Christ who offers new and more abundant ways forward.

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