

STRATEGIES FOR LIBERATORY LEADERSHIP:
EMPOWERING FEMALE CLERGY

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Doctor of Ministry

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ABSTRACT

STRATEGIES FOR LIBERATORY LEADERSHIP

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This Doctor of Ministry project explores strategies for liberatory leadership for Black clergywomen within churches affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated, through the lens of womanist theology and practical ministry application. Despite the significant presence and contributions of Black women in Black church life, their leadership continues to be marginalized in patriarchal ecclesial structures. The thesis of this project is, “What leadership strategies are needed for clergywomen to feel empowered to serve in ministry, and what is disempowering them to lead?” To address this question, I conducted three focus groups of female clergy from the Community Baptist Church of Englewood. This project addresses that gap by constructing a theological and ministerial framework that affirms the leadership of Black clergywomen and equips them to lead with resilience, advocacy, and institutional agency.

Two key figures are centered—Miriam, the prophetic sister of Moses, and Nannie Helen Burroughs, a pioneering educator and denominational leader—as case studies. Their lives and leadership embody essential themes: advocacy and prophetic witness, resilience and spiritual formation, institution building, and womanist preaching and teaching. Their stories serve as historical exemplars and theological models that speak powerfully into the present moment.

I propose a ministry initiative that includes a Clergywomen Advocacy Council, preaching cohorts, resilience retreats, a leadership academy, and digital and print platforms to elevate Black clergywomen's voices. The initiative bridges theological reflection and practical implementation by creating spaces where Black clergywomen's voices, gifts, and visions for the church are affirmed and activated.

Ultimately, this project contributes to the fields of womanist theology, Black church studies, and leadership development by offering a contextual and actionable model of ministry that challenges systemic exclusion and nurtures prophetic witness. It invites theological institutions and denominational bodies to recognize and resource Black clergywomen not as exceptions or auxiliaries but as vital leaders in the present and future of the Black church. This work embodies a liberating ecclesiology where justice, resilience, and hope are cultivated through the leadership of those historically pushed to the margins.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to God, who gave me the gift of discernment.

I dedicate this project to my mother, the late Clara Mae Graham, who taught me how to speak up and allow my brilliance to shine. I witnessed my mother's resilience, love, and advocacy for her children's health and well-being.

This project is dedicated to every woman called to serve the church, community, and nonprofit organizations who has ever had to shrink back and deny the power inside her. This is for the women who are looking for their voice in the world.

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Because you are, I am!

INTRODUCTION

The Community Baptist Church (*Hereafter CBC*) is located at 224 First Street in Englewood, New Jersey. In October of 1932, the church was founded by a group of members from First Baptist Church of Englewood who came together under the leadership of Rev. Robert L. Harris to form a Baptist Church. The church was formed in the home of Mrs. Rose Sample, where the founding members agreed to name the church “Community Baptist Mission.” Soon thereafter, they rented a building at 191 First Street and began worshipping in that space. In 1953, the church moved into 224 First Street, where it remains today. The founding members built the original edifice, and in 2014, the church marched into a new building constructed with an 800-seat sanctuary in the exact location.¹ Reverend Doctor Lester W. Taylor, Jr., has served as the Pastor since 1993.

The church is duly aligned with the American Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated. It is also a member of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Missions Convention. Locally, the church is a member of the North Jersey District Missionary Baptist Association and the General Baptist State Convention of New Jersey. Dr. Taylor has served as the local association’s Moderator and State Convention President. He has always been progressive and inclusive in his approach to ministry.

¹ Community Baptist Church of Englewood-NJ, “Church History,” accessed March 29, 2025. <https://cbcofe.org/church-history>.

Under Pastor Taylor's leadership, he licensed and ordained the first female minister, Rev. Gladys Brown. He also ordained the first female Deacon, Lorene Frasier. Since then, more than forty women have been licensed as ministers, many of whom have been ordained. To date, three female Pastors who were associate ministers at CBC have been called to lead Baptist churches.

The Associate Ministers Fellowship (hereafter AMF) has fifty-two associate ministers, both licensed and ordained. Many of the ministers have gone through the process for licensure and ordination through CBC under the leadership of Pastor Taylor. The role of the AMF is to assist the Pastor with ministerial duties, including but not limited to Sunday morning worship. The problem I have identified within my ministry context is that the female associate ministers are not serving actively within church leadership. Many of them have been licensed for over a decade and are not serving in any leadership capacities in the church. When called upon to participate in the weekly worship service, many reply, "I am not ready." As a minister, I believe one should always be ready to serve when called upon to lead. A ministerial competency is that a minister is always prepared to pray, read scripture, and possibly teach. However, in the five years I have served within the CBC, I have noticed that although there are fifty-two associate ministers, we see twenty on average on Sunday.

The problem is not the absence of support or opportunities. The problem is that these clergywomen are not serving within the local church or outside the community. The overarching question is, what leadership strategies are needed for these women to thrive

in ministry? Over time, have these female clergy lost hope for leadership roles within our church? Have their theological perspectives changed since their call and credentialing, and do they not know how to process their newfound beliefs? What strategies can be employed to empower them to move forward and lead? What do they need?

My research is on the “Strategies for Liberatory Leadership: Empowering Female Clergy.” Liberatory strategies provide a framework for practices that address historical structural obstacles to leadership while cultivating spaces for advocacy, resilience, and institution and community building.

While researching the book of Exodus from many commentaries, I noticed they did not include Miriam’s narrative. These commentaries made mention of Zipporah, Shiphrah, and Puah, alluding to the fact that they may have been supervisors of “a whole battalion of midwives.”² Others did not mention that Miriam followed Moses as he floated down the Nile River. For this project, my research on Miriam leans heavily toward the scholarship of Dr. Wilda Gafney and Dr. Kenneth Ngwa.

This project explores and expands ethical understandings of what empowers and disempowers Black clergywomen's leadership using the strategies of Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs. I will also engage feminist, womanist, and Africana Christian scholarship as examples of methods of how women have been empowered and

² Robert Alter, ed., *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary. Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses: Torah*. 1st ed. (New York London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 215.

disempowered within this Black Baptist church affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated. I will use Nannie Helen Burroughs, a historical and prominent leader and visionary of the early days of the National Baptist Convention. For my theological framework, I will use the life and leadership of the character Miriam, the sister of Moses.

Chapter One

Biblical Women's Strategies: Miriam's Resilience and Advocacy

Introduction

Within affiliated churches of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (hereafter, NBC), women have risen to serve in leadership roles within local churches over the past twenty-five years. Because the Convention's leadership is patriarchal, its teachings align with this construct. When teaching women's narratives of the Bible, they continue to teach male-centered narratives or diminish the voices of women in the Bible unless they serve a purpose to strengthen the patriarchal construct. For example, Rahab the Prostitute, Job's wife, cursed her husband, and Eve ate the figurative "apple," and the Proverbs 31 woman is the model for all women to aspire to become. Too often, narratives of the life of Miriam have been limited to focus on her playing a tambourine and dancing (Exod. 15:20–21), and being struck with leprosy (Num. 12:10) because she had spoken out against Moses (Num. 12:1–2). This is the narrative that I have been taught and heard preached. To empower women within Black church spaces, we must employ liberatory strategies for leadership that rely on broader understandings of biblical models such as Miriam. In doing so, we ascribe to a womanist and an Africana hermeneutic giving voice to women's narratives within the Bible.

We will unearth the Miriam narrative as a case study to demonstrate her leadership strategies in leading the people of Israel, advocating for her younger brother Moses, and empowering women through her resilience. I will also bring particular

attention to key elements of her leadership strategies: resilience, advocacy, and prophetic voice.

The Exodus narrative is about the liberation of the Israelites from the oppressive systems and structures of their Egyptian oppressors. The king instructed two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all male children born to Hebrew women and spare girls. They did not obey his words because they feared God more than the king (Exodus 1:15-16). This was one example of the control they experienced under the oppressive culture of the Egyptians. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume 1 notes that in Exodus chapter two, the narrative subtly inserts "class consciousness into the narrative" and argues that the narrative is more about the actions of the three women - Pharaoh's daughter and the two Hebrews, mother and daughter."³ The daughter is Miriam.

Although Miriam is not mentioned by name in this initial narrative, she becomes a prominent character in Exodus chapter two, where her narrative begins. Her presence did not negate Moses as the leader of the children of Israel. Her name and birth were not mentioned until the fifteenth chapter of Exodus. The reason is that women and children were excluded from the census and were considered property.

Exodus chapter eight records that Jochebed had married her nephew and had two children, Moses and Aaron. Within this particular narrative, Miriam's birth was not mentioned before the births of Aaron and Moses. Exodus chapter 15:20 includes Miriam's name as one of Jochebed's children.

³ *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 298.

Miriam is an unassuming Prophet. Within my church context, when referencing examples of women's leadership, we primarily talk about the leadership of Deborah, the Prophet and warrior, when Miriam was the first woman ascribed with this title. She, too, was a warrior. It was a victory dance she led as she crossed the dry land of the Red Sea into the promised land. She danced in victory and played the tambourine as women, children, and men followed her. Since the Bible was written within patriarchal cultural contexts, the story is constructed with Moses at the center of this narrative. It does not center Miriam as the one who led the people to victory. However, Womanist Biblical scholar Wilda Gafney suggests that while Moses was on the mountain speaking with God, Miriam led the people.⁴ While Moses was speaking to God, Miriam was also hearing from God concerning the people. This case study will center on Miriam's leadership in the Exodus narrative to highlight strategies for liberatory leadership that female clergy within the Baptist church can apply and become empowered while identifying areas in which they have been disempowered.

Within the culture of the Exodus narrative, scholars believe that the role of women could have been shared leadership with men.⁵ Gafney notes, there was a sacredness in the Exodus narrative to the firstborn, whether it be children or animals.⁶ She also acknowledges women and children being the hidden class during this time.

⁴ Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 97.

⁵ Norman K. Gottwald. *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 102.

⁶ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 101.

The system from which they were liberated was enslavement by their captors and liberation by God. The prophetic leadership of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron was also paramount to this text. As the children of Israel were led through the wilderness to cross the Red Sea, there is a demonstration of community, and God as a deliverer and a God of justice.

Dr. Kenneth Ngwa, a biblical scholar, in his book, *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*, centers the Miriam narrative without discrediting or lessening Moses' leadership and purpose. He has developed the notion of Badass Womanism, and suggests that its hermeneutic "does not stop asking questions but rather stops asking questions as if it were the only questions or the first question."⁷

In caring for her brother, Miriam has also cared for the entire community of Hebrew people. Ngwa was asserting how Israelite women were socially set above their enslaved counterparts, Egyptian women. Through this explanation, Ngwa defined what he calls Badass womanism. He describes it as an "iteration of womanism, recognizes, resists, and ultimately overcomes the triple consciousness and experiences of erasure, alienation, and singularity."⁸

Miriam As Advocate

Dr. Wilda Gafney does not explicitly define advocacy but explains the role of an advocate without using the word by stating, "Miriam was old enough to negotiate on her

⁷ Kenneth Numfor Ngwa. *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 47.

⁸ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 38.

mother's behalf in Moses' infancy."⁹ Miriam was an advocate for Moses and the children of Israel from her youth. In Exodus Chapter 2, we meet Miriam as the unnamed "sister" of Moses. In the Exodus narrative, we learn about Moses' sister, who watched their mother place baby Moses in the Nile River, hoping he would be rescued. The Exodus text explains, "His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him." Pharaoh had made a decree that all firstborn sons were to be murdered. As a twelve-year-old girl, Miriam protected and advocated for Moses. She was watching his basket float down the river. She made sure she would be the one to approach Pharaoh's daughter and ask if she wanted a Hebrew woman to nurse the infant.

As Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, the Bible records that she and her attendants were walking along the riverbank when she saw the basket. She then sent her female slave to retrieve the basket. The narrative continues and records that Moses' sister asked Pharaoh's daughter if she wanted her to go and get a Hebrew woman to nurse this child. The response was yes, and Moses' sister went and got their mother to nurse the baby. This narrative records that Moses' mother nursed her child, and Pharaoh's daughter paid her for this service. Miriam advocated for Moses' well-being from infancy. Miriam advocated ensuring he would survive and be safe, and that their mother would be his wet nurse.

As a young girl, Miriam employed a strategy of how she could carry out the mission of the safety and well-being of her brother. She saw her mother place the baby in

⁹ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 93.

the river, and she helped the process by watching it float along, seeing it intercepted and moved into action to ensure her brother's life would be saved.

In her sermon for the Rise Mentoring Network's 2022 commencement, "Ministering On The Backside Of A Mountain," Renita Weems lists the five women Moses needed to fulfill his destiny and mission in life. This does not diminish Moses' leadership, but it does center the women who enabled his leadership. Miriam was the first woman Weems mentioned as an advocate.¹⁰

As an advocate, Miriam saved her family from the erasure of their lineage and state-sanctioned death by strategizing to outmaneuver Pharaoh. I believe Miriam had seen the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, use this tactic because her response to protecting her brother to ensure he made it into the hands of Pharaoh's daughter was instinctive. She must have been aware that he should not have been alive due to the decree set out by the king. The king's bias was that Hebrew women give birth before the midwives could arrive. However, they used Pharaoh's biases against him to outmaneuver him by sparing Moses' life. It was as if Miriam's actions were instinctive in that she had witnessed older women within the camp make quick decisions that would impact their families. Moses' death was state-sanctioned as Pharaoh put out a decree that all Egyptian males under the age of two should be killed. Miriam helped Moses escape this fate after Shiphrah, Puah, and their mother. All of these actions were strategic.

¹⁰ Rise Together Mentorship Network, *RISE 2022 Graduation and Induction Ceremony*, featuring Renita Weems, "Ministering On The Backside Of A Mountain," YouTube video, last modified March 12, 2022, accessed November 8, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBO3lO47xIE>.

If Moses had been found alive, the king would have known the midwives disobeyed him. Therefore, they hid the child to protect him for as long as they could. Because the decree was to put these infants in the river and drown them, the strategy of Miriam's mother was to place him in the Nile River to have Pharaoh's daughter believe he had been floating in the river and survived. The achievement of these strategies was the life of Moses being spared, a demonstration of communal unity, and eradicating the erasure of generations of Israelite men. If the king successfully extinguished a generation of males, he could stop the population from increasing. The Israelite community was interested in preserving the lives of male children who would later provide leadership and a lineage to the people.

As clergywomen within the church, we often advocate for everyone except ourselves. Our work-life balance is not in sync. We are concerned about members of the congregation, other women within the church, our children, those within the community, and seniors. We advocate for the marginalized and disenfranchised and the community as a whole. However, we oftentimes forget how to advocate for our well-being. Advocacy takes planning, organizing, and using a set of strategies learned by our ancestors.

I do not believe anyone told Miriam to look out to make sure the child was found. Her advocacy was being aware of the needs of her infant brother. We, too, have these instincts. This child needed his mother to nurse him to survive and grow. Miriam was intentional about her conversation with Pharaoh's daughter. Her strategy was to approach

her as she and her servant came to bathe. Miriam knew the right timing to approach Pharaoh's daughter.

Wil Gafney suggests that Miriam was twelve years old when Moses was born. In this culture, she was a woman. She was at the age of betrothal.¹¹ Within the black culture, young girls who are on the threshold of adulthood are often referred to as being "womanish." In her book, "Too Heavy A Yoke," Chanequa Walker-Barnes asks black women, "When did you become "parentified?" Walker Barnes dispels the myth of the "strong black women."¹² She begins with the "parentified" child who was responsible for cooking, cleaning and perhaps caring for younger siblings. This is the culture that many black church women have experienced. Many of these women remain in the church today. Some clergywomen share this "parentified" experience, which results in a sisterhood. Others have been "parentified" at an early age, either by choice or by necessity of the familial dynamics. Miriam was parentified by ensuring Moses was cared for by their mother. She took on the responsibilities of his well-being. She advocated for and was instrumental in his survival.

Gafney asserts that Miriam's influence is expansive. Her assertion suggests the passing down of Miriam's name in the Hebrew Bible, Aramaic, and the Qumran bears witness to Miriam's name and influence across faith traditions.¹³ Her influence usurps religious constructs. Therefore, using Miriam's life as a model for clergywomen as they

¹¹ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*. 93

¹² Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). 2-3

¹³ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*. 96

employ her advocacy strategies will impact generations and equip them with tools to address and possibly navigate oppressive systems. As we remember the names of our ancestors and their legacy, we will not forget the name Miriam, and it will become synonymous with leadership, along with other biblical women.

Ngwa informs us how both Israelite and Hebrew women were depicted. He asserts that, “This exodus-motif begins to produce an Exodus story flow of resistance by portraying the Israelites as fruitful and prolific and describing Hebrew women as vigorous.”¹⁴ In the history of the U.S., a similar notion has been adopted by our society where Black women have been oversexualized because they were thought to be vigorous and able to bear many children and withstand immense amounts of pain and hardships. This was due to the abuse they suffered at the hands of the plantation owners, who would take advantage of their powerlessness and circumstances of being enslaved. This trope was placed upon them by their abusers and continues to be today. Black women have always had to advocate for our families and communities.

He credited Alice Walker for her definition of womanism and noted that it is to all Black women, especially women of color. In the preface of her book, “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden,” Walker provides a four-point definition of womanism.¹⁵ Throughout the years, many womanist scholars have contributed to womanist biblical interpretations,

¹⁴ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*. 38

¹⁵ Alice Walker. *In Search Of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, A Harvest book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004). xi-xii

ethics, and theology. This is why Wil Gafney's Midrash is important: it provides a womanist lens of Miriam.

Ngwa sheds new light on the life of Miriam as a "Badass" who lived on the margins of society yet prevailed and resisted societal norms. Miriam's first act of resistance, "Badassism," was advocating for her brother Moses. Even when Moses married a Cushite wife, Miriam advocated for him as a leader. God struck her with leprosy, and she was confined to the leper's camp for seven days, but the people would not move until she was deemed clean by the priests.

Miriam As Prophet and Water Woman

In Exodus Chapter 15, the Bible calls her a Prophet after Miriam led the people of Israel across the Red Sea. God defined the role of a prophet in Numbers 12 when God chastised Aaron and Miriam for speaking out against Moses. God said, I speak to my Prophets, but Moses, I speak to face-to-face.

Ngwa suggests that the reader of Exodus seeks to discern the voice of the earth and hear the earth in the narrative of the Exodus story.¹⁶ He also suggests that, like the name Moses, the name Miriam is wrapped in mythology and geography.¹⁷ He notes that Mary has come out of the communal womb and understands the ecological flow of water. Thus, Miriam has always been in proximity to water and watery spaces. Ngwa states that

¹⁶ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 135.

¹⁷ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 137.

because of Miriam's proximity to water, she can give voice to the waters and how they flow, inasmuch that they can be used to nurture or swallow up its victims of failed political systems. This account occurred at the parting and closing of the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army was swallowed as the sea closed. This was a sense of permanency of their liberation.

As a prophet, Miriam was a trailblazer and part of the Exodus leadership team along with Moses and Aaron. Ngwa states that as a prophet, Miriam was "a visionary, orator, and powerful leader on behalf of the dispossessed and marginalized."¹⁸ The Israelites were formerly enslaved people on the margins of society, intersecting with culture, ethnicity, and economy. Miriam's prophetic engagement begins with the womb, moves to the Nile River, and re-engages at the Red Sea. Each of these movements is paramount to her life and leadership. Although Moses is central to the Exodus narrative, this book is about a communal experience of redemption and divine healing. It was through the water that their lives went from bitter to sweet.

I have studied Miriam's narrative, and because of how she was associated with water and its proximity, it also speaks to her role as a prophet. Ngwa notes that this hermeneutic informs his *Africana Exodus* and *Exodus* analysis by stating that "human and ecological bodies interact and intersect."¹⁹

¹⁸ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*. 135

¹⁹ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*. 133

In previous research, I placed into conversation Miriam, as the water woman, and Oshun, a Yoruba Orisha, who is worshiped today by the Yoruba people in Southwestern Nigeria. Both Miriam and Oshun broke the patriarchal ceiling by Oshun helping the 16 other male Orishas who needed her help to complete their tasks on earth, and Miriam by assisting Moses to lead the people of Israel out of captivity and providing them with water from a supernatural well. Bringing these two traditions into conversation caused me to look deeper into Miriam as a person and prophet. It caused me to look into her life as a woman within the culture. At a young age, she took responsibility for strategizing how to intervene.

Gafney also suggested that it was Miriam who made the decision not to marry. This assertion reminded me of the power of our agency as clergywomen. Why do we give clergymen in leadership the power to silence our voices? Miriam was in the leper's camp, and the people were waiting for her when she emerged. Miriam's resilience was demonstrated through her experiences within the leper's camp. There are experiences we have in ministry and in life that strengthen and change us. I view Miriam as a nurturer, a protector of people on the margins. She always had a song in her heart, much like we do today. We find strength in our hymns and spiritual songs. Miriam's song was a celebration of praise to the God of liberation, deliverance, and justice from the hands of the Egyptians.

Because Miriam had never married or had children, this may have disgraced the family. This could be the reason for the writer to mention God, making reference to her father spitting in her face when Moses and Aaron were pleading with God not to send her

to the Lepers' camp. The act of spitting in one's face was an act of humiliation.²⁰ This experience could have disempowered her.

Miriam is referred to by some as the water woman. Ngwa makes a poignant suggestion that the water was an analogy for the community of Israel, and when Miriam was buried at Kadesh, the water dried up, signifying the major drying up of the community.²¹ After her death, Moses hits the rock with his staff, assisted by Aaron. Through this act, Moses' narrative begins to be written out of the Exodus, and he will not enter into the promised land spoken of throughout their wilderness experience.

Ngwa suggests, "Miriam's death means more than the death of a prophet and narrative strategist; it also means the death of a future."²² The future of generations to come, who will be the beneficiaries of this narrative through oral history. We, as female clergy, must share our stories as we remember the times when women in ministry flourished amid patriarchal hegemony.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are instances within the Exodus narrative where Miriam is disempowered and empowered.

²⁰ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 98.

²¹ Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 149.

²² Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 149.

An act that could have been disempowering to Miriam was the reference to her father spitting in her face, which would have been humiliating (Num. 12:14). Women within the church are spat on figuratively, which causes them to become disempowered. This humiliation often causes paralysis, where female clergy sit and remain quiet. They are spat upon for not conforming to the status quo. As with Miriam, her brothers spoke up for her, and some will speak up for female clergy. Some will allow us to preach in the pulpit, not from the floor. Some will invest in our development and not have us wear the cloak of shame.

What could have disempowered Miriam was her experience within the Lepers' camp. The scripture does not provide details about her time there or her experience as a Leper. However, to be publicly punished by God and removed from the life she knew because she spoke up could have been a disempowering experience for her. She was the Prophet and leader. After being deemed clean, she emerged to find that the children of Israel had not abandoned her. The lesson for female clergy within this account is to emerge with strength and hope. As a leader, the work continues no matter the situation or circumstance. Not everyone will be in opposition, and many will root for success. Miriam was not abandoned, nor will we be.

Exodus 15:20 speaks to how she led the dance, playing the timbrel as the women followed her across the Red Sea. As she crossed, she sang what we know as Miriam's Song.

“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.

Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

This song is empowering to the female clergy. It is a reminder that the Lord is highly exalted and will fight our battles and give us victory over our oppressors and enemies.

Miriam’s leadership strategies that empower female clergy today employ discernment to know God’s timing. As an advocate, Miriam’s strategy to save her brother and family lineage was to know God’s timing and skillfully communicate. She was also alert and attentive. Miriam saw the elders outmaneuver Pharaoh with his own words. She used this same strategy when speaking to Pharaoh’s daughter.

Miriam moved instinctively and did not tell anyone of her plan to rescue her brother. Female clergy must also trust their instincts to move forward. There is no record of her telling anyone of her plan or asking for permission to intervene. This was a successful strategic move, and her plan was successful.

Another leadership strategy employed by Miriam was when she confronted Moses. The bible does not explicitly record the account because of his marriage to the Cushite woman. Still, I would argue that the struggle with the power dynamics between her, Aaron, and Moses (Numbers 12:2) centered around God speaking to Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. However, Miriam was punished for speaking out, while Aaron was not.

In leadership, there are times when female clergy need to be bold, reclaim their agency, and suffer the consequences that come along without losing their voice. Miriam became leprous and stayed in the leper's camp for seven days until she was deemed "clean." She emerged with faith and was strengthened because afterward, she led the people across the Red Sea, singing, praising God, and playing the tambourine. She did not give up or sit out. She continued on the path set before her. As a Prophet, I argue God spoke to her during her time in the Lepers' camp. Her surviving this experience was also a demonstration of her resiliency.

Miriam was a childless, single woman in a patriarchal system of oppressive practices and overcame biases to be called a Prophet by God. She did not thrive through a title, and she thrived through her service to the children of Israel. She did not have to be appointed and reminded that she was a leader. She merely led as God instructed.

Miriam's strategy was to know the people she was called to lead. Building strong relationships is also a key strategy for liberatory leadership. In empowering women, it is key to take the words of Dr. Ngwa and ascribe to "badass womanism" as a way of being, which is to "overcome experiences of erasure, alienation, and singularity." Ministry leadership does not thrive in silos but in the community of like-minded sister clergy.

Chapter Two

History of African American Understandings of Empowerment and Women in Ministry: Case Study of Nannie Helen Burroughs

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the life and leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1865 – 1961) as a model to highlight an understanding of women’s empowerment in ministry.

The lens through which Ms. Burroughs viewed religious practices was traditionally based on the role of women in society during the early twentieth century. What may have been viewed as empowering then may not present itself as empowering today. No female ministers were licensed or ordained during Ms. Burroughs’ leadership tenure in the Convention. Therefore, as we seek out individual models and understandings of empowerment for women in ministry, insights will be drawn from women serving within the convention and making a difference in the lives of humanity through their work in their churches and communities. The leadership strategies employed by Ms. Burroughs could be viewed as a feminist or womanist movement because of her faith and the institutional building aimed at empowering black women and girls with the skills needed to become self-sufficient and financial contributors in sustaining their households. She was a strong proponent and voice combating racism, gender bias, and sexism both in the church and in all facets of her public life.

Nannie Helen Burroughs: Life and Leadership

Ms. Burroughs was born on May 2, 1878, in Orange, Virginia, to formerly enslaved parents, John Burroughs and Jennie Poindexter, sixteen years after slavery ended in 1865.²³ When she was a young girl, her father, a farmer and preacher, and her baby sister died. At the age of seven, she was infected with typhoid fever and forced to stay home from school for four years. As she was recovering, her mother moved to Washington, D.C., seeking a better educational opportunity for her only child.²⁴

After moving to Washington, D.C., her mother enrolled her in school, where she was a high achiever who made up two grade levels in one year. She graduated from M Street High School, which had a reputation for sending most students to college. Ms. Burroughs thrived in this environment, found her love for reading and writing, founded the “Harriet Beecher Stowe Literary Society and graduated with honors in 1896. This fueled her passion and life’s work as an advocate, educator, and institution builder. She continued this work until her passing on May 2, 1961, in Virginia.

In 1857, at twenty-one, Nannie Helen Burroughs was the corresponding secretary of the newly formed Women’s Convention. As the male ministerial leadership did not agree with the convention to have autonomy from the NBC, they had Mrs. Layton address the women and propose that they become subordinate to a “Board” under the

²³ Audrey Thomas McCluskey. *A Forgotten Sisterhood: Pioneering Black Women Educators and Activists in the Jim Crow South*. 1st paperback ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 103.

²⁴ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 103.

NBC. Ms. Burroughs continued to fight against the reorganization. She published a handbook, *What To Do and How To Do It*, that was distributed through the Women's Convention to women at both the local and state levels.²⁵ This handbook contained record books, bookkeeping advice, and a reminder that the convention's work was business and spiritual. Higginbotham notes that Burroughs filled hundreds of orders of these handbooks, buttons, postcards, leaflets, etc.

In 1900, Nannie Helen Burroughs called for sisterhood within the National Baptist Convention to demonstrate the need for self-criticism to address and eradicate gender inequalities and exclusion within the church and the black community.²⁶ In the early 1900s, Nannie Helen Burroughs was a prominent leader in the Women's Convention before it was reorganized as the Women's Auxiliary under the NBC.

Then, in 1908, to publicize the activities of the Women's Convention, Burroughs designated "National Women's Day" as the last Sunday in July. This vision came as Ms. Burroughs presented this day as a lucrative fundraiser and a way for the Convention to fund itself and its initiatives. Her vision and strategy for the convention were to raise funds to support the ministry of churches affiliated with the convention and to purchase land to build churches. From its inception, this annual celebration within the local churches was an expression of sisterhood and a means of financial support for the Women's Convention.²⁷ The purpose of this day was to provide opportunities and space

²⁵ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 161.

²⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 152.

²⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 161.

for women to exercise their gifts of public speaking, organizing, and preaching. One of the goals of this day was to raise funds for NBC-affiliated churches. She would also use this day to share information about issues concerning Baptist women. Through the fundraising efforts of women within the black church, schools, orphanages, and senior housing were built, and food and clothing were provided to the poor. They were primarily responsible for initiating and leading these efforts to incorporate social services in the church's mission.²⁸ These efforts depended on the talents and resources of poor black church women nationwide. Today, black church women remain the most significant population within the NBC, and their resources provide financial support for the ministry's operations.

When the Women's Convention was founded in 1903, it yielded over one million members. During this time, the convention was self-governed and shared knowledge about local and state activities. The female leadership of the convention also initiated their agenda and elected their leaders. In response to the patriarchal leadership of the Convention, Ms. Burroughs argued, "The women who wash for a living have as much right, as much business, to be leaders in our churches, if they are spiritually, morally, and intellectually fitted, as the women who are mistresses of their own homes."²⁹ The evidence of the women organizing and operating a convention is a testament to their abilities to strategize and lead nationally.

²⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

²⁹ Bettye Collier-Thomas. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*. 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 123.

Starting in 1907, Black Baptist Women's Conventions committed to supporting education within their respective states. It was through the organizing of Women's conventions that financially supported black Baptist-owned colleges.³⁰ These institutions thrived on the backs and resources of black women, who were subordinate to the patriarchal leadership but held the power of the purse as the major fundraisers.

At age twenty-one, Ms. Burroughs gave her first speech to the National Baptist Convention entitled, "How The Sisters Are Hindered From Helping."³¹ Her speech addressed the gender division within the National Baptist Convention. Years before, many of the mainstream women's movements, such as the National Association of Colored Women, the National Federation of African American Women, and Black Baptist Women, struggled to clearly articulate the importance of equality within the church and the National Convention.³²

The Women's Convention was well respected and emulated by women throughout the country, and in 1909, the Women's Convention boasted of having established its school for women and girls.³³ The convention did not merely advocate for gender equality but also for racial equality amongst all African Americans. They were not separatists, as some men were during this time. So much so that they moved to turn the convention into an auxiliary to be subordinate to the National Baptist Convention. Many

³⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 58.

³¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 150.

³² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 153.

³³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 5.

of the ministers and leaders wanted to be sure the women and the convention were subordinate to the patriarchal construct of the convention.

In her book, *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Higginbotham quotes the words of Ms. Burroughs as saying, “For several years, there has been a righteous discontent, a burning zeal to go forward in His (Christ’s) name among the Baptist women of our churches and it will be the dynamic force in the religious campaign at the opening of the twentieth century.”³⁴ This statement, spoken by Nannie Helen Burroughs, remains poignant today. In the twenty-first century, more female Pastors and preachers are within the NBC. When discussing with my former Pastor about my call to ministry, he said that there will be more female Pastors over the next ten years than there have been over the past decade. His words have come to fruition with the number of female Pastors leading NBC-affiliated churches. Women in ministry no longer have to look to a male example of ministry to model themselves after. It is empowering for women to see women serving in ministry and being affirmed.

While both men and women were fighting racism within the broader social and political climate of our country, Black women were simultaneously fighting for gender equality within a hegemonic convention. There have been times when women were given equal approval within the convention, only to have it rescinded.³⁵ The former Women of Color in Ministry organization has assisted women with ordination. For example, if a church is unwilling to ordain a female who has been seminary trained, the ministry would

³⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 8.

³⁵ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 153.

call upon a group of female pastors to form an ordination council to catechize the candidate for ordination.

Gender bias remains present within the convention and local churches by not ordaining women or permitting women to preach at the regional convention. In October 2024, Rev. Dr. Gina Stewart preached at the joint Baptist convention, where the Progressive Baptist Convention extended the invitation. At the time, Dr. Stewart was the President of the Lott Carey Foreign Missions Convention. Her sermon title was, “What We Gave Up For Jesus of Nazareth?” where her call to action was, “Be Like Claudia.”³⁶ Dr. Stewart encouraged the attendees to stand up for Jesus like Claudia, Pilate’s wife, who told him not to have anything to do with the judgment of Jesus. This sermon gave voice to a little-known woman in the scriptures who is placed on the margins of the community because of her gender. After her powerful sermon and the positive response from the conventions and those viewing via social media, the sermon was removed only from the National Baptist Convention website. The convention President blamed the removal of the sermon on hackers. Many female clergy viewed the removal of Dr. Stewart’s sermon from the NBC website as a reminder of the convention's continued view of women as preachers. We have come a long way and still have a long way to go.

³⁶ Christ Missionary Baptist Church. “- YouTube.” Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhiH3DOjBxs&t=2437s>.

Although women continue to break the glass ceilings in ministry, many still fight for the right to be acknowledged and considered for senior leadership in local churches. Having to fight these systems of gender bias for licensing and ordination can also be disempowering. Finding one's preaching voice and place in ministry when there are many obstacles and hurdles is also disempowering. In a recent article published by the Connecticut Public, Eddy Martinez interviewed Rev. Eboni Marshall Turman, PhD, Associate Professor of Theology and African American Religion at Yale Divinity School, who sued the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem for gender discrimination. It is alleged that the hiring committee passed over her application for the Senior Pastor position due to her gender. Although the lawsuit was dismissed, it cited "ministerial exception," which protects religious institutions against anti-discrimination laws. Dr. Turman also alleges that a staffer asked about her ability to minister to men, which would not be a question for male candidates. Dr. Turman argues, "According to the law, churches have the right to discriminate."³⁷ The article concludes with a quote from Dr. Turman in response to rationalizing contradictions between facing opposing messages from God while facing exclusion and being scorned by the church. She further argues, "I don't try to reconcile the irreconcilable. I try to destroy it. I try to dismantle it. I try to transform unjust norms and unjust practices in the church into life-giving and life-affirming practices in the church."³⁸ Dr. Turman's fight against discriminatory practices in the church sends a stark message that clergywomen will not accept these practices but

³⁷ "Yale Divinity School Professor Addresses Gender Discrimination Lawsuit Dismissal against NY Church." *Connecticut Public*. Last modified April 21, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2025. <https://www.ctpublic.org/news/2025-04-21/yale-divinity-school-professor-addresses-gender-discrimination-lawsuit-dismissal-against-ny-church>.

³⁸ Connecticut Public, "Yale Divinity School Professor."

will continue to lift our voices against biases, and not take the church hiding behind a cloak of “ministerial exceptions,” and continue to dismantle oppressive patriarchal constructs.

How do we resist and navigate these spaces when the courts side with the oppressor in the name of religion? Dr. Stewart and Dr. Turman are strong women who are secure in their roles within the faith community and academy and have years of experience facing sexism. For those entering into ministry and trying to find their space and place, these experiences are disempowering, but the public responses from many clergywomen are empowering.

Foundations of Empowerment: National Training School for Colored Women and Girls

Ms. Burroughs’ desire to start a school was ignited by being rejected for a teaching job. While attending M Street School in Washington, D.C., Burroughs studied Domestic Science. Upon graduation, she applied for a position as a Domestic Science teacher in the Washington, D.C. public school district and at Tuskegee Institute.³⁹ Neither of these schools hired her. During those days, the employment options were either as a teacher at a black school or as a domestic worker. Because her late mother had been a domestic worker, she did not want to do that type of work.

When she moved to Louisville, Kentucky, she implemented her curriculum. Upon her return to Washington, D.C., her vision for the school and strategies for implementing

³⁹ Opal V. Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*. Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Garland Pub, 1995), 26.

a successful training school for colored women and girls came to fruition. She strategized along with others who were establishing schools at that time, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Lucy Laney, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown.⁴⁰

In 1909, Burroughs founded “The National Training School for Women and Girls” in Washington, D.C. She believed that the school “must be national, not Baptist - something all Colored women can do for all Colored girls.”⁴¹ She believed the school should be in the nation's capital so it would be a beacon of light for black women. This was her plea to the Women’s Convention when asking for their financial support for the school in purchasing six acres on a hilltop where the school would be built. One of her contemporaries, Booker T. Washington, disagreed with her on the school’s location. He believed the school should be built in the South, where most Colored people were. Booker T. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and is known for his philosophy of uplifting through education, vocational training, and economic empowerment. He was also strongly opposed to racial injustice and segregation.

Burroughs was an activist educator and national figure known for her newspaper columns, speeches, and writings, and for championing the suffrage movement. There is no mention of her personal life, but she did stay away from conventional stereotypes such as marriage. She could be found effectively inserting herself into the male-centered discourse on the advancement of Black people. Ms. Burroughs’ work was parallel to her

⁴⁰ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 126.

⁴¹ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 104.

contemporaries in education Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), the founder of the National Council of Negro Women which she founded in 1935, and also the founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Florida which is a Historically Black College. Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1960), was a gifted and profound orator, a former teacher from M Street School who was also an author and earned a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1862. Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) was the founding president of the National Association of Colored Women and the first black woman to serve on the District of Columbia Board of Education. These three women were visionaries who built institutions.⁴² In 1948, Ms. Burroughs was elected the President of the Women's Convention because Mrs. Layton had become ill and unable to continue her tenure.⁴³

In her book titled, *Jesus, Justice, and Jobs*, Bettye Collier Thomas writes a chapter where she provides a historical context of Nannie Helen Burroughs' experiences while serving in the Women's Convention and the National Baptist Convention, USA Inc. From its beginning, the women's convention was a separate entity from the NBC, USA, Inc., after the NBC split. As part of their bylaws, the women's convention would be dissolved and become the Women's Auxiliary.⁴⁴ Under these new bylaws, Ms. Burroughs' training school for girls and women would no longer receive support from the convention, the Women's Department, or any other branch or department within the newly organized Convention.⁴⁵

⁴² McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 104.

⁴³ Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*.

⁴⁴ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 137.

⁴⁵ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 136.

The leaders within the church's patriarchal hierarchical structure did not want the Women's Convention to be equal to the National Convention. They were now placing it under the rule of hegemony. Department leaders were told to no longer support Ms. Burroughs or her school because they could no longer rule and control the school. Hence, they started a smear campaign on Ms. Burroughs' leadership, education, advocacy, and legacy. Although she faced opposition from the patriarchal leadership of the convention, Ms. Burroughs continued to provide resources to the Baptist women within the convention. Ms. Burroughs never relinquished her agency to those who would try to oppress her work and words. Modern-day women have access to resources that have allowed them to curate online platforms without the need for support from their pastors or any other local organization. There are organizations to help uplift women of color attempting to navigate this ministerial terrain.

Ms. Burroughs wrote many articles, gave several speeches, and designed and taught a curriculum centered around empowering women within NBC. Her life and ministry resonate with women in ministry today. Her life's work was not relegated to the church but to the nation. So often, ministry is viewed as pulpit ministry only. Ms. Burroughs not only gave speeches to hundreds of people at conventions, but her writing voice was said to be an anticipation of the civil rights movement. She wrote an article in her pamphlet and addressed it to intelligent white southerners. She recommended to them to "stop using the words, "n****r, darkie, and coon and stop telling n****r jokes. They are not funny...use courtesy titles such as Mr., Mrs., and Miss when speaking to

Blacks.”⁴⁶ This was a bold and radical move for the time. This confrontation with whites could have cost her her life, but she was not afraid. She reminded Black people, “There are no deliverers. We must get to the Promised Land ourselves.”⁴⁷ In these speeches, she advocated for Black people across the nation. She had no fear of speaking out against racism. She spoke about a self-sufficient mindset in going after what you want. Throughout her speeches, Ms. Burroughs’ faith was demonstrated. She was often critical of the black community and its male leaders. Because she showed no partiality, her public discourse did not spare the racism of the President of the United States. This resulted in her being put under government surveillance.⁴⁸

This is empowering. She stood up to the oppressors and challenged her race. She often leaned into her faith and bible knowledge by comparing the challenges of Black people with the enslaved children of Israel. Ms. Burroughs also reminded Black folks to be proud of their race and humanity. She never ascribed to the inferiority complex. She was empowered as she navigated the oppressive system of her day.

Women in ministry in the twenty-first century benefited from having mentors and contemporaries who became their conversation partners. Through relationships with like-minded women, our peers encourage us. Through these relationships, we find those who will provide guidance and space for us to thrive while being our authentic selves. The work of ministry does not happen in silos but in community. Post-pandemic, communal

⁴⁶ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 107.

⁴⁷ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 108.

⁴⁸ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106.

spaces use online platforms for women in ministry and women of color in ministry. There is the Circle of Sacred Fire, which empowers and trains women in ministry, and R.I.S.E. Women's Network, a mentoring program for clergywomen and lay leaders, and additional training through the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership, and various conferences and cohorts to support women in ministry. There are also online spaces such as the Pink Robe Chronicles, which preaches an afro-futuristic womanist-centered gospel, and the Gathering, a Womanist church led by Dr. Irie Sessions and Dr. Kamila Sharpe Harris. The lack of exposure to these organizations is due to proximity. It is essential that women within my context be exposed to benefits and become empowered by these types of sisterhoods. Ms. Burroughs was a staunch proponent of Sisterhood's goals for those attending her school: to facilitate sisterhood among the students.

Although she had become weary, she remained steadfast and did not let anyone discourage her or distract her from empowering other women. Female clergy understand we are embarking upon a time when we are effecting change in how ministry is viewed. Because there are female clergy, little girls can see a woman and believe they, too, can become a pastoral leader or an influential leader within the church.

Ms. Burroughs' ministry remains a prominent model within the black Baptist church today through Women's Day celebrations. The drawback to this model in the twenty-first century is that Women's Day remains a major fundraiser for many NBC churches, and it overshadows what the day is to represent, which is not only having women lead but also addressing issues and concerns affecting women. Ms. Burroughs

used this day to distribute her newsletter with announcements about social issues, challenges within the convention, training materials for leadership within the church, and curriculum. Another drawback is that male Pastors often only seek female clergy for Women's Day and not other celebratory days.

Ms. Burroughs' model can be used today to address social issues of our times. In 2025, the discussions should be around women's reproductive rights and voting rights for all women in a time where voter suppression is prevalent. How are women empowered by this day if they have no role in church leadership or the worship experience for the remainder of the year? Will these days begin to incorporate women twenty and over, or will we continue to center the day on women forty and over? Churches need to create a way to provide spaces for women to lead and not limit their leadership to one day per year. If the church budget relies on Women's Day as a fundraiser, women can request visibility more than once a year.

An empowering aspect of Ms. Burroughs' life was that she used her gift of writing to make a change within her community and society. Female clergy can be empowered by knowing they, too, can use their gifts outside of the church to impact the lives of others. There is no blueprint for ministry or how a woman shows up in her calling because not everyone is called to the pulpit.

Empowering Clergywomen: A Transformative Pedagogy for Leadership Development

Ms. Burroughs' philosophy for the training school was centered around her religion, and it was a private Christian school that became known as the "School of the three Bs", which stood for the Bible, the bath, and the broom."⁴⁹ These principles were of a clean life, a clean body, and a clean house. She believed that a spiritually rich education would create a strong sisterhood among students that would strengthen them when dealing with the obstacles of race, class, and gender they would face within society.⁵⁰ Ms. Burroughs had written several letters, articles, and curricula. Therefore, she was very particular about proper grammar when writing. As a result, Ms. Burroughs ensured that each student completed two years of English as a requirement for graduation from her school.

Her background in domestic science influenced her approach to service-oriented jobs that were in demand and would lead to higher wages for those who she believed could "professionalize the existing race, gender, and segregated job market."⁵¹ As with her black female contemporaries, who founded schools, her curriculum included liberal courses such as English, history and Negro History, foreign languages, higher mathematics, and science. During a speech at the Women's Convention, Ms. Burroughs asserted: "We believe that an industrial and classical education can be simultaneously attained, and it is our duty to get both."⁵² I agree with this statement because, as women in ministry who are serving the church, we are bi-vocational. We continue to develop

⁴⁹ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106.

⁵⁰ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106.

⁵¹ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106.

⁵² McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106..

ourselves professionally for our careers in both the work of the ministry, the marketplace, and the public square. For many of us to adapt during those times, we created a platform where we could carry out the work of the ministry in service to humanity. It gave female clergy the courage to curate a ministry towards a specific demographic with a global reach. Ms. Burroughs' vision for her school was not to minimize it to National Baptist women but to expand its reach so that women across the globe could access her school. The school's curriculum aimed to equip students with vocational skills and a well-rounded education that fostered intellectual, moral, and social development.

Leadership strategies should be transformational and empowering. The pedagogy for leadership development in the Training School for Colored Women and Girls included standards for learning and a goal of self-sufficiency upon graduation. Therefore, Ms. Burroughs insisted on being in charge of the curriculum, the school's management, the finances, personnel, and development.⁵³ This often put her at odds with the patriarchal leadership of the Convention.

Ms. Burroughs' Theological Worldview of Redemption and Hope for Formerly Enslaved People

Townsend Gilkes notes that not only was Nannie Helen Burroughs a leader of African-American church women, but also that Burroughs' work provided a critical case study of how Black women shaped African-American culture to their purposes through

⁵³ McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood*, 106.

their organizational involvement and ideas.⁵⁴ This chapter by Townsend Gilkes focuses on Nannie Helen Burroughs' play "The Slabtown District Convention." Her play was a comedy based on African-American religious culture, the hegemonic environment, patriarchal hierarchy, and those who remain complicit in these oppressive structures.⁵⁵ This book uses Burroughs' plays and speeches as a case study for leadership styles and models that would transform African American communities. Burroughs herself believed that the Black community needed to stick together to effect change within society and the community-at-large. She was not concerned with racial issues if they divided the black community.⁵⁶

Ms. Burroughs' philosophy was based on Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. She expressed her view of slavery when she said, "I was in slavery but I wasn't no slave...we ain't no hung down head race, we were poor, but proud."⁵⁷ She did not allow her circumstances to disempower her. It is the pride of our ancestors that although at times they struggled to put food on the table, families did not go hungry. Even though they lived off of meager funds, every basic need within the household was met.

⁵⁴ Cheryl Gilkes. *If It Wasn't for the Women--: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 143.

⁵⁵ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women--*, 143.

⁵⁶ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women--*, 143.

⁵⁷ Nannie Helen Burroughs. *Nannie Helen Burroughs: A Documentary Portrait of an Early Civil Rights Pioneer, 1900–1959*, ed. Kelisha B. Graves. African American Intellectual Heritage Series (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

In her 1927 speech titled, “With All Thy Getting,” Burroughs stated, “Black folk, “the Negro” may have been brought to this country to make contributions that would redeem America because America needs it and the Negro has helped save America several times.”⁵⁸ This is a statement that I believe rings true today. It is the spending trends of African American people that continue to support the American economy. The Alabama boycott was an example of the African American dollar impacting the community. The Boycott affected the economy because people were not using public transportation, which resulted in Montgomery losing revenue.

Ms. Burroughs’ view of slavery was oxymoronic. Having stated she was not a slave, she in turn said, “American slavery was a success. If it did anything for the Negro it 1) Woke him up, 2) Made him work, and brought him in. Her belief was the Negro went into slavery a heathen and came out a Christian.”⁵⁹ I disagree with this statement, but it is essential to consider Ms. Burroughs’s view of slavery from both perspectives. For me, there were no benefits to American slavery. However, having been born to formerly enslaved parents, there remained an oppressive culture and mentality of white supremacy that impacted Blacks post-enslavement. Although the physical bodies were free, it took time for the mind to transform from being enslaved to being free. This type of disempowerment is also present within women in ministry in many of our churches, where we have been conditioned to accept oppressive systems and behaviors within the National Baptist construct.

⁵⁸ Easter, Opal V. *Nannie Helen Burroughs*. Studies in African American History and Culture. New York: Garland Pub, 1995, 26.

⁵⁹ Burroughs, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*. ed. Graves, 57.

Nannie Helen Burroughs witnessed oppressive systems and lived in these oppressive systems for most of her life, where there were no rights for people of color. She ended up being an advocate for Black people and women in particular. She lived during the Jim Crow era, and her mother believed the only way out was through education. Her father, being a farmer, signals to me that there was a high probability that the plantation owner still employed him. Because her father was a preacher, she was raised in a Christian home where faith was fostered and relied upon.

Ms. Burroughs' worldview begins with seeing far beyond her circumstances and being able to see good in dire circumstances. Within the church, sexism still exists, and we witness women transition from dependence on these oppressive bureaucratic constructs to being liberated by curating ministries outside of the institutional church.

What is Empowerment?

Townsend Gilkes quotes Burroughs as saying, "We must have a glorified womanhood that can look any man in the face - White, red, yellow, brown, or black, and tell of the nobility of character within black womanhood."⁶⁰

The prophetic voice of Nannie Helen Burroughs is missing today. She spoke out against racism and gender bias and was part of the suffrage movement. She advocated for education, uplifting the Negro race, and Christian activism. She wrote about these

⁶⁰ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...*, 142.

subjects and gave speeches on these topics. This empowered those who read her works and those who heard her speeches. She would tell the white women not to involve race when it came to the right to vote. Her messages of resilience, empowerment, and hope were for all women.

In reflecting on the life and work of Ms. Burroughs, she stated, “Women have come to the rescue.”⁶¹ Women are the majority of the membership in our churches, providing a large percentage of the resources to meet the ministry’s expenses. As these were Ms. Burroughs’ words, in the early 1900s, they resonate with us today. These words could be a determining factor in reclaiming their agency after being oppressed for years. Knowing you have a part in unifying our country demonstrates the unity among Black women. I speak this to female clergy within my context. Burroughs also states, “We unfurl our banner upon which is inscribed this motto, “The world for Christ. Women, Arise, He Calleth for Thee.”⁶² We must rise to the call of Christ in our lives and become empowered to serve within the church, the marketplace, or the public square.

Mrs. Burroughs’ life was layered and complex. She faced oppressive systems within the National Baptist Convention and society. However, she never let her voice be silenced. She moved with strength, tenacity, and mirrored Christian values, and Christ's likeness in all of her works. She never veered away from her faith to fit the mold of

⁶¹ Burroughs, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, ed. Graves, 57.

⁶² Burroughs, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, ed. Graves, 59.

society or the church. Her life is a testament to women in ministry within the local church and the world.

Although today we look at some of her practices as legalistic, they were the acceptable model for the early twentieth century in which she served. There were expectations of women's decorum to be looked upon as a respectable woman or girl. I remember my mother teaching us to wear the proper undergarments and ensure nothing moved. This was an essential part of church culture and the societal norm in many Black communities. I agree with Ms. Burroughs and believe that women in ministry, as well as women as a whole, should dress modestly. I address attire when addressing the question, "What is Empowerment?" Attire for Black women in a church context has long been a discussion in the church. For women in ministry, we have been asked to wear robes to not tempt men from looking at our anatomical structure. Most of the issues around dress have to do with tempting men and policing our bodies so they would not be tempted. In this case, empowerment within my agency is not to be concerned about the behaviors of our male counterparts. Women wearing pants to preach has also been a topic of contention. We must reclaim our agency and be empowered by making decisions about our bodies.

In conclusion, using Ms. Nannie Helen Burroughs to understand empowerment and women in ministry, we see her as the first generation of free people. Perhaps it was what she witnessed on the plantation that made her a woman of strength and courage. Possibly, her older sister served as a second mother and took on many of the adult responsibilities. This was common within African American households.

The rejection that fueled her passion for opening a school for colored women and girls across the country. She did not allow this rejection to cause her to retreat, but it propelled her to implement a model when her family moved to Louisville, Kentucky. She had adjusted this model because of the school she desired, where she taught centering her faith, the Bible, and Christian values. Nannie Helen Burroughs was able to go to school to learn how to read and write at a time when it was illegal to teach Black people how to read. She dove into her passion for writing, which became an intricate part of her work and ministry. I believe the foundation that had been set in her formative years prepared her to fight for the liberation of people and against oppressive systems in the Convention, church, and society.

In forming the school, we see that Ms. Burroughs had contemporaries who were simultaneously building institutions. Cultivating a Sisterhood with like-minded women is vital to women in ministry. We need conversation partners and to be surrounded by those who will hold us accountable. Ms. Burroughs did not relinquish the curriculum to those who wanted to reign but held on to it so the model would not change. As women in ministry, we must learn to protect our intellectual property.

Conclusion

Examining the life and work of Nannie Helen Burroughs provides a framework for understanding empowerment for women in ministry. As a woman who boldly confronted systemic sexism and racism, Ms. Burroughs' leadership offers a model of resistance and institution-building that remains relevant. Her unwavering commitment to

education, Christian activism, and gender justice positioned her as a transformative leader who defied societal and religious limitations.

Rather than retreat in the face of rejection, Ms. Burroughs created educational spaces that affirmed Black women's dignity and leadership capacity. She developed a pedagogical model rooted in Christian values, self-sufficiency, and moral integrity, ensuring that Black women had access to leadership development. Her insistence on retaining her curriculum highlights the importance of women protecting their intellectual contributions, a lesson that remains critical for clergywomen navigating leadership in male-dominated spaces.

Empowerment, as Ms. Burroughs demonstrated, is not merely about individual advancement but about creating ways for communal liberation. Her legacy challenges clergywomen to confront institutional barriers, cultivate supportive sisterhoods, and reclaim their agency in ministry. In responding to the call of Christ, women in ministry must continue to advocate for justice, lead with conviction, and ensure that their prophetic voices, like Ms. Burroughs', are neither silenced nor forgotten.

Chapter Three

Strategies and Obstacles for Thriving Articulated by Female Clergy

Introduction

To develop more contemporary strategies for liberatory leadership and a deeper understanding of the conditions Black clergywomen in Black faith community settings face in providing it, we must learn from the views and experiences they describe.

Developing these strategies, oral histories were collected by conducting three focus groups with clergywomen who attend Community Baptist Church, which is affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA. Incorporated, and heard the many concerns of these women as well as their call stories. By sharing their experiences, they can provide insights on the many challenges in leadership for female clergy. I was reminded of the words of the late womanist Christian social ethicist Reverend Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon when she stated, “...it only matters that a place was carved out so we could do the work our souls must have for the survival of the whole of creation while loving ourselves, regardless.”⁶³ Although all the women expressed how they had been trained to preach, they realized not all female clergy are called to pulpit ministry. Many have expressed soul work to be with Youth (toddlers through teens). Minister #8 stated, “Not only am I drawn to the youth, I also minister to the parents of the youth.”⁶⁴ Within

⁶³ Alison Gise Johnson. “Dancing Redemption’s Song, Across Generations: An Interview with Katie G. Cannon,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018): 75, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/703390>.

⁶⁴ Minister #8, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

the Black church, this is paramount as we believe in the African Proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. In addition to Pastoring and Preaching, other call stories included, Ministry to Women, Chaplaincy, Evangelism to urban communities, Train Leaders, Christian Education, and Counseling to the underserved, marginalized and oppressed as well as the Unchurched, which Minister #11 defines as, “People who go to church because they love the singing and they want to hear a certain soloist singing, and jump up and down but they are not submerging with the word.”⁶⁵ I call this seeking a euphoric experience. While Minister #11 provided her definition, the most common definition of someone “unchurched” within the Black Church is one who has never attended church.

When referencing the Black Church, I use the definition provided by scholar, pastor, and United States Senator Rafael Warnock in *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*. As he states, “When I refer to the black church, I speak of the varied ecclesial groupings of Christians of African descent, inside and outside black and white denominations...”⁶⁶ Warnock sees slave history as a unifying factor in the black church identity and focuses on black theology. His assertion is the bedrock of the churches affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated.

The demographic of women participating in the focus group is Baby Boomers and Gen Z of African American and Caribbean descent. I will explore three themes

⁶⁵ Minister #11, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁶⁶ Raphael Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).4

from our focus group sessions - Sisterhood, Mentoring, and Practical Training. These themes illustrate how critical each area is to the participants because they were common threads in each focus group.

Sisterhood

The theme of sisterhood was a common thread and extremely important to the women who participated in the focus groups. The type of sisterhood they are seeking is between the female clergy with whom they serve in the church. Based on our focus groups, sisterhood can evolve into friendships and mentoring relationships between the clergywomen of Community Baptist Church of Englewood. A feeling of sisterhood among female clergy can be a resource for the liberatory leadership of female clergy. During the initial focus group, the topic of sisterhood emerged. Because they wanted to dive deeper into the notion and nuances of sisterhood, further inquiry was needed to determine if the desire for sisterhood was impeding their progress. Therefore, the second focus group continued the discussion on the importance of sisterhood and the possibility of the lack of sisterhood impeding their advancement in ministry inside and outside the church.

Some of their concerns were the lack of trust, which caused a barrier to cultivating relationships with fellow female clergy members within the church. Trust was of great concern because they believed they could not be vulnerable or be accountable to each other. Other focus group participants believed some of the female ministers within the church had other agendas, which were not discussed, leading

them to distrust and not make attempts for closer relationships. Another impediment mentioned was impostor syndrome, which results in not being confident in their identity as ministers when comparing themselves to others and finding themselves in settings where there are other ministers they believe to be more accomplished. Some expressed their feelings of being undervalued as opposed to those who have attended a seminary. These attitudes from self and others have stifled some female clergy. Minister #7 noted that “Seminary talk is the new language. Those without seminary-trained clergy appear to be valued more than others.” Ministers trained in-house have observed that many ministers being used have come from other churches. This, too, has caused distrust, which impedes sisterhood bonds.

Minister #4 shared, “Sisterhood means holding each other up and being accountable, cultivating the female dynamic of trust, and feelings of safety and being vulnerable.” Minister #1 believes Sisterhood should be, “Without agendas and extreme sensitivities. Knowing who you are, being colleagues and not friends to everyone, and having discernment are key.”⁶⁷ It is apparent that for these clergywomen, ethics is what sisterhood should embody.

Sisterhood should happen naturally and not be forced or manipulated. It can involve shared emotions, backgrounds, and interests, or willingness to be supportive and caring across differences. We encounter some people with whom we share ideals, education, family values, hobbies, and other aspects of our identities. Upon hearing

⁶⁷ Minister #1, focus group via Zoom, August 5, 2024.

responses and views of sisterhood, there is an expectation of clergywomen serving in the church who believe that by serving together, we should be friends. This sounds ideal, but realistically, any relationship must be cultivated. Rev. Brittini L. Palmer, a Preacher, Public Theologian, and Communications Consultant, writes about both truths and myths about leadership in “The Truth About Black Women In Ministry”. When listing a truth, she asserts that Ministry for Black Women goes far beyond the institutional church, noting: “For some, this has resulted in leaving ‘traditional’ expressions of Christianity to pursue pathways to African religious practices which emphasize self-care and creating non-judgmental spaces.”⁶⁸ Palmer asserts her hope for her fellow “Black sisters, colleagues, friends, and strangers will resist the myths and lean into the truths to support Black women in ministry and the theological world.”⁶⁹ Ideally, sisterhood supports, affirms, and accepts while providing a safe space to share, learn and grow together.

When contemplating how I view sisterhood, I lean into Alice Walker’s definition of womanism from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, which provided the working definition for Womanism.⁷⁰ Walker’s definition has four points that can be a resource for an expansive conceptualization of black sisterhood.

- From womanish. A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a

⁶⁸ Brittini L. Palmer, “The Truth About Black Women in Ministry,” *Sojourners*, November 23, 2021. Accessed March 13, 2025. <https://sojo.net/articles/truth-about-black-women-ministry>.

⁶⁹ Palmer, “The Truth About Black Women in Ministry.” Accessed March 13, 2025. <https://sojo.net/articles/truth-about-black-women-ministry>.

⁷⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York, NY: Road Integrated Media, 2003), xi.

woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Acting grown-up. Being grown-up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

- A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.
- Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself regardless.
- Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Walker's definition is important for Black women as it supports women's relationships with one another and the community as a whole because we love - regardless.

Sisterhood provides a community of sisters and a safe space for women to be their authentic selves without judgment and with care. Sisterhood amongst female clergy is essential and needs opportunities to develop beyond the church setting, understanding we are co-laborers in this journey, and sharing more experiences than we have spoken about. As Black clergywomen, I have exposed my sisters to womanist theology because "it is empowering to Black women" as stated by Melbourne S. Cummings, Professor of Communications and Culture at Howard University, and Judi Moore Latta, Professor of Radio and TV and at Howard University, in their article "When They Honor the Voice: Centering African American Women's Call Stories," found in the *Journal of Black Studies*.⁷¹ The

⁷¹ Melbourne S. Cummings and Judi Moore Latta, "When They Honor the Voice: Centering African American Women's Call Stories," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (2010): 666–82, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40648534>.

journal also states, “Unlike in the broader feminist tradition, which did not include Black women, which marginalizes Black women and is based on bourgeois access to culture and its interrogation, womanist principles embrace a non-bourgeois set of experiences, are inter-dialogical, and are open to ordinary women whose names and lives are little known.”⁷² Although my context is Black Baptist clergywomen, we are ordinary women who share experiences and whose names may not be known to all of our colleagues. Still, there are opportunities to expand our relationship and move from colleagues to sisters.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a transformative, intergenerational relationship that nurtures, equips, and advocates for emerging leaders by providing spiritual, emotional, and practical guidance. For Black clergywomen, mentoring serves as a survival strategy, creating spaces of resilience, wisdom-sharing, and institutional empowerment within the church.

Among the focus group members, evidence of the need for mentoring within the Associate Ministers Fellowship was vital to their spiritual and professional development. Many of the participants shared how mentoring has been beneficial to them. Minister #11 has mentors, and stated, “I met some of them, and a few are still mentoring me even today. But I had to be really careful.”⁷³ Minister #5 said, “Who I

⁷² Cummings and Latta, “When They Honor the Voice.”

⁷³ Minister #11, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

consider mentors that probably don't know that they mentored me because a mentor doesn't have to be somebody in your life forever, right? So I would say Minister #12 and Minister #1 definitely mentored me and helped me get out of my head...and those things have positioned me to seek what God has called me to do outside of the four walls of the church.”⁷⁴ This is an excellent example of informal mentoring and demonstrates that not all mentoring relationships are formal. Minister #9 said, “I was influenced by a woman, my mentor, Reverend Jones.”⁷⁵ Minister #7 shared, “I did not grow up in church. My first Pastor was a woman... I spoke to her about my call, and she discerned my preparedness by enrolling in seminary.”⁷⁶ Today, Minister #7 asks, “Where do I fit in? I don't feel comfortable.”⁷⁷

Exposure to and influence by the right mentor can enrich one's theological perspective and how one looks at ministry. As a result of mentoring, Minister #3 said, “Being exposed to womanist theology by a mentor had facilitated her growth and expanded her theological lens.”⁷⁸ Minister #11 shared how she is taking a Hebrew language class to learn how to interpret better and understand the Hebrew Bible and receive “clarity of how to read and interpret the Word.”⁷⁹ Minister #3 said, “The mystery of it all as ministry unfolds...not how you may have scripted it for yourself. It's the wow of God, and context is everything. What you put out and what you get in, and we no longer put God in a box; he can and does do incredible things.”⁸⁰ This

⁷⁴ Minister #5, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁵ Minister #9, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁶ Minister #7, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁷ Minister #7, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁸ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁷⁹ Minister #11, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁸⁰ Minister #11, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

quote was in response to Minister #11 sharing how she was attending a Hebrew class to better understand the Hebrew Bible's context. My interpretation of Minister #3's response to her statement is that we never know what God has planned for us. We develop a plan and make efforts to implement these plans in our lives, but God has the final say. She suggests that we consider the context when reading Scripture and look for the phenomena of what God is doing, and that we should not limit our potential or God's greatness to do incredible things.

The clergywomen also shared how learning and growth would be best cultivated in community by spending time together. This could be an emerging model of group mentoring. An interesting suggestion was to consider a sorority model for mentoring. A sorority model for mentoring is a sisterhood where intentional networking is facilitated among its members. Within this model, there is a lifelong commitment to look out for the well-being of your sisters while helping advance their career, spiritual formation, and other areas they seek to develop. It was also shared how men and women are socialized differently. Minister #3 said, "Men are socialized to work in teams by playing sports, but women are socialized to be led and not to lead."⁸¹

Men can mentor women, but some nuances can come with being mentored by a woman in ministry. Ministers #4 and #8 shared how, in the past, Ministers would serve alongside Deacons as part of a leadership training/mentoring process, which

⁸¹ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

was helpful. This pairing would assist the new minister with the leadership skills needed within the church. Minister #8 said, “And I look, and I see that ministries, ministers aren’t in ministry leadership positions, and that sorrows me because I believe every person that God has called, he’s called to do something and one of those is to be oversight to get the leadership practice that is supposed to come from the church. We agree that “Iron Sharpens Iron, so one person sharpens another.”⁸² (Proverbs 27:7)

In her article “What is Cultural Hegemony?” Niki Lisa Cole, Ph.D., summarized, “Cultural hegemony or our tacit agreement with the way that things are, is a result of socialization, our experiences with social institutions, and our exposure to cultural narratives and imagery-all of which reflect the beliefs and values of the ruling class.”⁸³ Dr. Cole categorizes the church as one of the social institutions, where I argue that those ruling are males, some of whom still do not believe women are called to preach or to ministerial leadership.

Although the majority of church membership is women, men have always led. For this reason, women continue to struggle to respond to the call of God in their lives. Mentoring initiatives for clergywomen provide a network of women who will support them as they navigate the terrains of ecclesial structures of oppression. Mentoring provides guidance and shares experiences that can lead to empowerment

⁸² Minister #8, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁸³ Niki Lisa Cole. “How the Ruling Class Maintains Power Using Ideas and Norms.” ThoughtCo, August 13, 2024, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-hegemony-3026121>.

and the reclaiming of the clergywomen's agency, and provides guidance on the pathways of career advancement in the secular arena, nonprofit organization, or the public square.

Practical Training and Leadership Development

When discussing the individual call of each woman, there was one area in which many felt both empowered and disempowered: formal training. Within my ministry context, practical duties are referred to as ministerial competencies. These competencies are what a minister should be prepared to do, including leading Sunday morning worship, praying when called upon, teaching a Bible study class, and reading scripture. The Pastor's expectation is that every minister should be equipped to serve when asked.

A consensus emerged from focus group conversations on the need for more "instruction" from the Senior Pastor. During the Minister-In-Training process, the concern was that the clergywomen were only provided instructions on how to write and formulate a sermon. The desire was to have additional training in other areas to which they have been called, such as counseling, evangelism, and education, as their focus. The clergywomen's concern is that they are waiting for the Pastor to provide instructions on their next steps, should they move forward in ministry when they are not called to pulpit ministry or to preach. This made the women feel disempowered by feeling as though they were ill-equipped to serve in ministry. Minister #5 stated, "I look at the forty-seven or how many of us there are, and I think people are confused

or feel stuck because they don't get opportunities to do many things, and so, those giftings inside of them don't have the opportunity to grow or get the experience so you always feel like a neophyte, and we all know that that's not a great feeling.”⁸⁴ Others shared that they are waiting for the senior Pastor to provide guidance on how to operate in their call. They also feel as though they never had “freedom to fail”. Failure is part of any process, particularly when one assumes a leadership role, and this feeling needs to be acknowledged and affirmed.

Most women had gone through the Minister-in-Training process at our church, averaging between three and four years. The largest group that had gone through this training process was eighteen. The average group size has been ten. Everyone preached their licensing sermon during the same month during the morning worship services. One member, not licensed through this process, also went through the Minister-In-Training (M.I.T.) process at their former church for one year. I was licensed at a church without formal training, but the prerequisite was being enrolled in a seminary. Minister #10 felt the M.I.T. process should be one year, which she expressed was the Pastor's initial expectation. Minister #4 recalls, “It's just like he used to have...counseling.”⁸⁵ There was a time in the church's ministry when the Pastor licensed individuals into the counseling ministry. No information was provided on what this process entailed. The participants remembered the individuals who went through this training. Still, it was not the mainstream M.I.T. training, which the Senior Pastor teaches. This was a concern for the clergywomen because they believed

⁸⁴ Minister #5, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁸⁵ Minister #4, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

that if they were not trained or provided guidance in an area other than preaching, they would not be of service in the church, and they would abandon their call. The clergywomen believe there is a need for their area of ministry and are looking for a way to develop professionally as ministers.

Through their Minister-In-Training process, the women were taught how to construct a sermon, practice preaching, and those trained at CBC had their sermons reviewed by the Pastor. Many women shared how this arduous and lengthy process was due to the inconsistency of the Pastor's availability. The last group licensed in 2024 was further delayed due to COVID, and the process took nearly five to six years to complete. After being licensed, the preachers become formal members of the Associate Ministers Fellowship. On average, these women have been licensed for ten years and ordained between one and ten years. The licensed ministers continue to grapple with their call and place within the ministry context. Minister #4 said, "I'm looking for instructions. I'm looking for direction."⁸⁶ The reasons for this wrestling are that they do not feel adequately prepared and believe they need additional training. Minister #4 also stated, "I feel disempowered because I don't have a degree, you know. I don't know how far I would be able to go without it and I don't know how to implement something where I can."⁸⁷ She references the lack of credentials in terms of a formal theological education and demonstrates a need for mentoring where confidence and agency are restored.

⁸⁶ Minister #4, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

⁸⁷ Minister #4, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

Within their descriptions of the credentialing process as well as their call stories, many of the women shared how they do not feel they are called to preach but to serve in other areas of ministry. For example, one woman shared that she was not called to preach but to counseling, but was trained to be a preacher. A question that was important for me to note is: how do you train a lot of people for ministry without inquiring into the area in which they feel they are being called? The majority of the women shared how they know they are called to Christian Education. A few of the women have taken advantage of opportunities to teach Bible study topics for women's Bible studies or new members' orientations. In contrast, others shared that the challenge for them was knowing where to fit in.

In one of the groups, some participants also shared how, years ago, there were ministers licensed to Christian Counseling, but now it is assumed that everyone responding has a desire for pulpit ministry. Minister #3 recalled, "Pastor is mentoring those who have been called to preach, and he keeps on saying that, and I think many people dismiss that. They're like well, I'm in ministry, and come to serve God, and that's what I come to do. I don't want to be a preacher."⁸⁸ She asserts, "I think that's where the disconnect comes in at because, in terms of Pastor allowing or seeing people other than being called to preach, he constantly says that you as ministers have been called to preach, and everybody does not feel empowered to preach."

⁸⁸ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

She feels that when this statement is made, it leaves those who don't feel called to preach questioning, "Then why am I here?" She said people often look confused, as if to say, "What do you mean I've been called?"⁸⁹

When sharing our "call stories," women shared how some did not initially hear the voice of God, but it was their Pastor telling them they were called to ministry. One account from a sister was that she heard God instruct her to go to the Pastor and was then placed with the Deaconess ministry; Hearing people questioning their intellect concerning seminary enrollment; being advised by their former Pastor to read the entire book of Proverbs three times and then come back with what she had learned from the reading. She was then placed in a Minister-in-Training class. Hearing God but not responding until years or decades later, a lack of trust, imposter syndrome, feeling like they could not be called to ministry, and being unequipped.

Out of all the call stories, only one person named a female Pastor as instrumental to her pursuit of seminary training; however, this is not the Pastor who licensed her.

Many participants shared their needs for additional training beyond what they received as a Minister-in-Training (MIT). Minister #5 stated that she "ran from a call. I am called to Counseling. I was put in the MIT class. Still struggling and still needing more training to go through the process."⁹⁰ Minister #4 stated, "I'm looking

⁸⁹ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, August 5, 2024.

⁹⁰ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, August 5, 2024.

for instructions. I'm looking for direction.”⁹¹ She also shared, “I think I could have been more fluid in a smaller church. I really do. It was a lot of hindrances that I had that I don't think I would have had to go through.” My perception of this comment is that she believes a smaller church is where she believes she could thrive because there is less bureaucracy.

Although there are monthly meetings with the senior Pastor and the Associate Ministers Fellowship, the clergywomen believe there needs to be targeted training and nurturing for the female clergy. They suggested workshops to guide female clergy in the work of the ministry they have been called to, team building to foster trust and camaraderie, and spiritual formation. Within a seminary context, there is a formation component when we are discerning the call of God on our lives, which assists with navigating the terrain of the academy, church, and public square. Many of these women know where God is calling them to lead but are faced with many impediments that have been mentioned.

In this context, practical training is hands-on, structured preparation that equips female clergy with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate their ministerial roles effectively. It includes mentorship, leadership development, and ministry-specific instruction that empowers them to serve with competence and a sense of agency within the church. Without practical training, clergywomen may feel

⁹¹ Minister #4, focus group via Zoom, October 25, 2024.

disempowered by having feelings of imposter syndrome because they may feel equipped to serve in ministry effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to time constraints, the women wanted to continue the conversation, but we were not able to do so. Although two of the participants spoke about experiencing sexism in their former churches, we did not elaborate. However, I would have liked to delve deeper into how women navigated sexism in response to their call. They did speak briefly about how the Pastor did not allow them to preach from the pulpit, and they had to speak at a podium on the floor. They both shared how, when meeting with their former Pastors in response to the call of God on their lives, they were met with the question, “Did you really hear God speak to you?” I assert these are conversations that can be disempowering for a woman responding to the call of God on her life, and because of such a response, clergywomen may opt to retreat.

Knowing the church’s culture and hierarchical structure, no one discussed the power dynamics that potentially hindered progress or exacerbated the morals of church bureaucracy.

For many in the groups, this was the first time anyone had spoken to the female clergy to ask what empowered and disempowered them from thriving in ministry. The sisters were appreciative and expressed a desire to find ways to

continue the conversation with the Senior Pastor. Minister #11 shared, “I’ve done a lot...that have gone unnoticed, and unrecognized. But God, in his faithfulness, rewarded me.”⁹²

Also woven into this chapter are their individual call stories that included the need for training. The final impediment to serving was time constraints. Because there are now time limits for invocation and intercessory prayer during morning worship, female clergy feel more apprehensive about serving on Sunday morning. This could be the main reason many choose not to serve when asked.

As a result of this second focus group, the women have requested a meeting with the Pastor to discuss how he could be of more assistance to the female clergy who desire to thrive and serve regularly, and assist the church.

Although briefly discussed, self-care strategies were essential to the women. How do we care for ourselves? How do we balance work, life, and ministry? What does that look like? What does that sound like, and what does that feel like? The many responses included going to the spa, creating playlists, laughing with friends, meditating, and resting.

The groups discussed how they have changed and grown from when they heard God call them to ministry until now. Although they expressed several

⁹² Minister #11, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

impediments to serving in the church's ministry, it has not impeded their personal growth and development as ministers. But I wanted to dive deeper into what the women feel disempowered because their posture was a declaration of having power over their agency, and not how systems within the church have disempowered them.

The three themes presented and concerns shared during the focus groups are below. However, there is much more to unearth by continuing this dialogue with this group of clergywomen.

Employing strategies for liberatory leadership includes preaching and teaching of womanist hermeneutics that centers the lived experiences of Black clergywomen while affirming them and equipping them for leadership. **Sisterhood** provides a sense of community building and mutual support that fosters authentic relationships and provides access to a network of clergywomen who will advocate by challenging the oppressive systems and patriarchal constructs within the church. **Mentoring** aids in the development of institution building that we've learned through the life of Nannie Helen Burroughs. Mentoring provides the support to create organizations, fosters intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and provides safe communal spaces to develop and grow as a leader. This space is also where resilience and spiritual formation are cultivated. **Practical Training and Leadership Development** engages biblical narratives of women's leadership, like Miriam. Practical training does not necessarily translate into having to attend a seminary. However, a curriculum can be created for clergywomen within the local church to address these three themes.

When we actively listen to the personal experiences of Black Baptist clergywomen, we see that their approach to liberating, justice-centered leadership employs various strategies that focus on transforming both the church and society.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Vision for Resilient and Supported Leadership of Black Baptist Women

Introduction

One of the central aims of this research was to collect oral histories from clergywomen serving within my church context, which is an affiliate of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (hereafter, NBC). Historically, the NBC leadership has been comprised of older Black men. Their cabinets also reflected a patriarchal structure, with women only leading in the women's auxiliary of the convention. Within the State of New Jersey, there has been a female president of the United Missionary Baptist State Convention of New Jersey, Inc. (2018 - 2022) and a female moderator of the Middlesex Missionary Baptist Association (2012 - 2016). Both of these women are pastors and have experienced sexism within the convention, where they were instructed to go to the women's meeting during the winter board meeting because the leadership assumed these women were in the wrong meeting space. After all, these leadership roles have been reserved for men. Although many churches within the NBC have accepted female Pastors, the leadership has recently received a female minister who is the wife of the current President.

One woman in the cabinet has been appointed to a leadership role. This is major for a convention that has never had female leadership in its parent body. There remains a need for leadership roles for female clergy to evolve within the convention. The issue of sexism and misogyny is prevalent within the convention and is a systemic issue as clergywomen continue to navigate this space. Although clergywomen have ascended to

pastoral leadership roles, they must contend with a convention steeped in patriarchal leadership that survives on the financial resources of Black women they consider subordinate. Christian social ethicist Keri Day addressed this problem in her book, “Unfinished Business,” when she argues, “...some black churches employ charitable-choice approaches of faith-based initiatives. While these current approaches to poverty seek to empower these women to find hope and meaning, they fail to address larger structural injustices that perpetuate poverty.”⁹³ She also notes that there has been some traction in how these faith-based initiatives have helped poor black women. I would argue the church continues to survive on the backs of poor black women. Those institutions that teach “widow’s mite” (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4) theology at times coercively guilt women into giving charitably at the expense of their households. This is a type of financial exploitation that is cloaked in the “you sit high, you pay high” geared towards clergy and a practice in many of the Black Baptist churches today.

This project explored and expanded ethical understandings of what empowers and disempowers Black clergywomen's leadership. Therefore, I have engaged feminist, womanist, and Africana Christian scholarship as conceptual resources to aid in my analysis and articulation of examples of strategies of how women have been empowered and disempowered within Black Baptist churches affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated.

Too much of the theological framework of the NBC is antiquated and remains from the nineteenth century. The curriculum available to churches is relevant in terms of

⁹³ Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 31.

current events, but does not reframe narratives of women in the Bible. The same stories are told with different illustrations. My experience has been that any mention of feminism and womanism translates as anti-male for most NBC faith leaders. We continue to talk about the “Bad Girls” of the Bible and fail to study the scriptures from a feminist or womanist lens that empowers women because they bring into question their experiences and how they align with the experiences of church women. I reflect on Dr. Irie Sessions' book, “Badass Women of the Bible,” which reimagines narratives of women in the scriptures. These women were not bad girls who did bad things, but they were badass women who went against the societal norms of the day.

In this final chapter, I will share my key findings and their theological and practical implications through the Book of Exodus, highlighting the leadership of Miriam, Moses’ sister, and Nannie Helen Burroughs, a leader in the National Baptist Convention, and founder of the National Training School for Colored Women and Girls. I will also reflect on how this research has impacted my personal and ministerial development, and conclude with final thoughts and encouragement to female clergy to show up in spaces as their authentic selves to do ministry work.

Employing Leadership Strategies

Using the biblical narrative of Miriam’s life of advocacy and resilience as a core example of liberatory strategies for leadership, as well as Nannie Helen Burroughs’ leadership strategies of faith, fearlessness, economics, and education. These strategies, which include institutional and community building, will promote long-term sustainability. When employing these strategies, we also consider how the lives of clergywomen, Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs intersect. In her book

“Intersectionality As Critical Social Theory, Patricia Hill Collins argues, “The very term intersectionality invokes the idea of interconnections, mutual engagement, and relationships. She further asserts, “race, gender, class, and other systems of power are constituted and maintained through relational processes, gaining meaning through the nature of these relationships.”⁹⁴ The experiences of both these women intersected at race, class, and gender as well as oppressive systems of society during that time, much like clergywomen today.

The overarching question for this research is: What leadership strategies are needed for these women to feel empowered to serve in ministry? Over time, have these female clergy lost hope for their leadership role within the church? Have their theological perspectives changed since their call and credentialing, and they may be unsure how to apply their newfound beliefs within this ministry context? What strategies can be employed to empower clergywomen to move forward and lead? What is needed? My research has answered these questions.

Over the past decade, women have risen to serve as Pastors within NBC affiliate churches. However, Nannie Helen Burroughs, although not a clergywoman, paved the way for women within the convention. She held prominent positions within the Women’s Convention before it was reorganized under the NBC. Today, clergywomen can learn from her historical advocacy for women and resilience in adversity as she experienced resistance from the patriarchal leadership of NBC.

⁹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University press, 2019), 45-46.

Womanist and feminist Biblical interpretation bring a new perspective to women's narratives in the bible. This was my approach when conducting a case study on the leadership and resilience of Miriam to serve as a model for clergywomen today. Black clergywomen can learn leadership strategies from women in the Bible, most notably Miriam, whose account begins in Exodus chapter two. Her leadership roles are recorded (Exodus 2, 15:20–21; Numbers 12) in the Hebrew bible.

Leadership strategies clergywomen can take from the Miriam case study are to advocate for their families and the community at-large. Miriam was a Prophet, worship leader, and influencer. Clergywomen have the power to influence any space they inhabit. During COVID, we learned about the power of influence through social media platforms. Clergywomen can influence people worldwide through various platforms and the audience they have garnered by association with the congregation. Within the denominational structure, there are opportunities to lead the congregation in worship in different ways. The pulpit is not the only vehicle in which worship can take place. During the civil rights movement, freedom songs were sung in the public square, leading folks to incorporate a form of worship within their activism. Miriam, playing her tambourine and dancing, led the children of Israel in worship as they crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20–21). She exuded spiritual leadership in this instance, but she also delivered Israel from the hands of Pharaoh as an act of resistance. The people followed her and worshipped along with her. She led the people alongside her brothers, Moses and Aaron—a woman leading alongside two men. A strategy for clergywomen is to find their voice and independence when serving alongside men. Miriam's leadership also included strength in adversity, and she was challenged when she spoke out against Moses' decision to marry a Cushite

woman (Numbers 12:1). When punished and spoken out against, she remained vigilant. She maintained a balance between her prophetic voice and leadership amidst organizational challenges.

Today's lesson for clergywomen is to continue to exercise your right to speak and never abdicate your agency to patriarchy. Resiliency is your strength. Miriam understood the culture and hierarchical structure of the Israelites. She led with obedience to the structures and was humble in her role as a Prophet. Clergywomen must lead in the face of opposition while fostering unity within the body. Many churches have adopted the notion that women should not preach in the pulpit or serve as Pastors. As clergy women face these barriers, they understand that there are glass ceilings that remain to be shattered. Do not cause dissension, but work to bring unity despite blatant disrespect and opposition. Miriam's leadership is not spoken about enough, and her leadership is an exemplary model for clergywomen today.

Leadership strategies for clergywomen can be gleaned from the case study on Nannie Helen Burroughs, who advocated for women and empowered them economically as an institutional builder, an educator, a visionary, an entrepreneur, and a woman of strong faith. She remained resilient when faced with obstacles from the convention regarding financial sustainability for her school and ministry. She remained unwavering in her position as one who educated and empowered women across the convention and the country. When strategizing, be courageous and establish a ministry outside of the church. Be courageous and resilient in your pursuits of ministry. Nannie Helen Burroughs

had a prophetic voice for her time. She stood against adversity when the convention no longer provided funding for her school, yet she persevered and remained resilient. She was a visionary who refused to let her dream die. She stood on her faith with spiritual authority as her authentic self.

When the NBC began to manipulate other leaders within the women's convention to become an auxiliary under the NBC, Ms. Burroughs resisted these systems within the church and society. By establishing her school, she demonstrated the power of education and equipped women for leadership in various disciplines. Nannie Helen Burroughs demonstrated strategies as she navigated through patriarchy within the NBC and created opportunities for women, most notably by establishing Women's Day within NBC-affiliated churches. Through this initiative, leaders are equipped to be public speakers and advocates. Her life is a testament to resilience, vision, faith in leadership, and activism. She was not a preacher but a great orator who gave speeches nationally and used her gift of writing to develop the curriculum for her school and training manuals for churches. It was through these skills that she used her voice as an advocate. The strategy for clergywomen is to lean into their strengths to impact change.

Through the case study of Ms. Burroughs and responses during the focus groups, it is important to create mentoring and training programs for clergywomen. If possible, within the church construct, it is crucial to expand roles for clergywomen within the church. During one of our discussions, it was noted that at one time, clergy were leaders over ministries along with Deacons. This model needs to be re-established to provide opportunities for clergywomen. In addition, her model of leadership, education, and

activism can also be implemented in the church. Christian education is important, and it is also essential to understand the needs of the people. I learned through the groups that many of the clergywomen have tools they can use to equip others through sharing knowledge. There needs to be a space for clergywomen to discuss the issues and needs of clergywomen. This is something the women have requested of the senior Pastor.

Clergywomen can be at the forefront of activism, highlighting the importance of women's rights and voting privileges. Clergywomen can be at the forefront of many women's issues today. This would expand the way they currently view ministry. Ministry is not reserved for the pulpit, but it is prophetic. Fannie Lou Hamer, Praithia Hall, Pauli Murray, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and many others had a prophetic voice during their times. It is time for clergywomen to reclaim their voice in the church, denominational structures, and society.

When comparing these trailblazing women, Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs, their lives are examples for clergywomen today. They both led through opposition and adversity while also advocating for marginalized communities. Both women were visionary leaders with prophetic voices that led to the liberation of people: Miriam, the children of Israel, and Nannie Helen Burroughs, Black women. Their advocacy changed the trajectory, repositioning marginalized and oppressed people to be liberated. As clergywomen, we must advocate at the heart of what we do. Vulnerability is a strength, and we recognize that there is strength in our resilience and advocacy, which are

pathways to liberatory leadership. Miriam led under the guidance of Jewish law, and Nannie Helen Burroughs led by the tenets of her Christian faith.

Theological Education and Expanding Ministry Beyond the Pulpit

One of the concerns mentioned during the focus group was education. Nannie Helen Burroughs was a strong proponent of education. When thinking about the disparities of clergywomen within the NBC, statistics have proven that Black women are attending seminary at the same rate as Black men and are therefore equipping themselves to serve in ecclesiastical leadership roles. In Britanni Palmer's article, "The Truth About Black Women," she asserts, "The Association of Theological Schools reports that in 2020 a total of 5,068 Black men enrolled in seminary with 4,412 Black women enrolling as well. This is significant because when compared to other racial groups, Black men and Black women enroll in seminary at comparable rates...Many Black women are pursuing theological education or ordination despite the barriers. Far from allowing their theological education to pigeonhole them into traditional church positions or teaching positions, Black women are using their education to pursue advocacy, education, or the arts."⁹⁵ Palmer argues that women earning theological degrees are not allowing patriarchy to "pigeonhole" them into traditional positions but are expanding their reach to other areas of ministry. If the convention does not allow clergywomen to serve, there are opportunities outside of the limits of the NBC. In many ways, local churches have surpassed the practices and traditions of the NBC by selecting female Pastors, Assistant

⁹⁵ Palmer, "The Truth About Black Women in Ministry."

Pastors, and Executive Pastors. In this same article, Palmer lists a few myths about Black women in ministry: they cannot preach, are compensated equally for their ministry, and are treated equally to men. Clergywomen can learn from these myths by not ascribing to them and understanding that ministry, much like corporate America, does not give equal pay or opportunities to women. Some barriers can be broken through resilience. Palmer asserts her list of truths, reminding clergywomen that we play a vital role in churches, pursue theological education, and that ministry goes far beyond the institutional church. Clergywomen must reclaim their agency and move beyond the institutional church to serve humanity. The strategy for clergywomen is to find safe and affirming spaces with other women who serve outside of the institutional church setting. Their goal is not singularly focused pulpit ministry but to move strategically to center themselves around like-minded women.

What Is Needed To Provide Support

Two primary issues are empowering clergywomen and positioning them to thrive and remain present and active. There is a need for group and individual counseling, as some shared how they live through past hurts and traumas that impact their ministry and their will and desire to move forward. "Recovery is a space where we need to lead,"⁹⁶ stated Minister #3. The issues that led to some of these traumas they experienced were responding to the call, being misplaced in ministry, and being intimidated by other clergywomen.

⁹⁶ Minister #3, focus group via Zoom, February 10, 2025.

There is a need for group and one-on-one mentoring and counseling/therapy. This gathering does not have to be a social activity, but can be facilitated through group mentoring and team building. Some organizations provide mentoring and leadership training outside of the church. However, the clergywomen seek an in-house initiative to facilitate sisterhood amongst those serving alongside one another. Mentoring is a sustainable initiative to guide generations of clergywomen at a crossroads. In the book, “Walking Through The Valley,” in the chapter titled “Even When One’s Face Is On Fire,” Angela D. Sims discusses the importance of women having the courage to tell their stories of “...collective existence emerges from women who gather together to assure understanding among Black women so that understanding among women becomes a catalyst to live so that others might also live.”⁹⁷

There is a need for clergywomen to be exposed to womanist and feminist thought by leading scholars. My observation is that only a few clergywomen have heard of feminism and womanism but have not been exposed to theology, biblical interpretation, or ethics. It is essential that no one feels inferior, and that women be exposed to new ways of being as women in ministry outside our context.

This project will provide resources and training for female clergy within the church in response to the question asked by Nannie Helen Burroughs in her first speech: "What is Hindering the Sisters From Helping?" Ms. Burroughs asked the questions and

⁹⁷ Emilie Maureen Townes, ed., *Walking through the Valley: Womanist Explorations in the Spirit of Katie Geneva Cannon*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 104.

responded through her training school for colored women and girls, her advocacy for women within the National Baptist Convention, and her advocacy for women's education, leadership, economic development, and independence. Miriam led the children of Israel amidst a public rebuke.

Personal Reflections and Growth

As I identified the problem within my context, I thought about how I can help equip and empower my sisters. I had not been at the church for long when I noticed my fellow clergy sisters being asked to participate in morning worship or volunteer to preach and would, in most cases, respond with either a “no” or “I’m not ready.” I believed that because the Pastor had trained clergywomen, they would be equipped to lead, serve, and teach. I understood they were called to preach, so how could they pass up an opportunity? The perspective of what I thought I knew has changed. No matter how progressive or affirming the leader may be, if the area you have been called to is not being nurtured, it shows up as an insecurity or unavailability. This is not the case.

The clergywomen in my context are developing themselves by taking classes through the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership after hearing about womanism. Through conducting the focus groups, I learned another clergywoman has enrolled in a doctoral program, and another is taking a language class to learn Hebrew to study the bible. This information is only known to those who have engaged the women and those with whom they feel safe. Their reluctance is based on an insecurity of not knowing where or how to enter into the area of ministry that is their soul work.

I put myself in their position and asked, “Would I be able to thrive in an environment where I am always told I am a preacher and being trained to preach while knowing I am not called to preach?” Would this disempower me? Would this cause me to shrink back, appearing as though I have abandoned my call while being displaced in ministry? What if there were no one to point me in the direction of help and hope? Would I thrive? How would I find resilience within my agency? Who would advocate for me when I do not have the courage to advocate for myself?

Reflecting on the lives of Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs, I am thankful for the legacy of leadership they gave to women in their respective times. Reimagining the Miriam narrative, I saw her resilience through the lens of leadership. I have always seen advocacy, but have never studied her leadership until now. I am thankful for Dr. Kenneth Ngwa, who centered the Exodus narrative around Miriam without minimizing Moses’ role. I had always heard of Nannie Helen Burroughs and was surprised to see how her legacy had been erased from the NBC website. There is no mention of her school or the impact her leadership had on the women’s auxiliary of the convention. Ms. Burroughs leaves a rich legacy of advocacy, resilience, education, and institution-building. There is room for further research on the impact of her school on the workforce and its effectiveness in training Black women and girls.

These women were not looking for sisterhood due to the lack of friendships; they were looking for women with whom they could grow. A common thread throughout the

conversations during the focus groups was training and furthering their education. This is where additional research on the impact of the National Training School's effectiveness can be helpful. I have addressed the pedagogy of the school with key requirements for training. Including a specific module for training women for ministry is needed within the local church and local associations by using the model of a Baptist woman whose legacy has been minimized to a paragraph on the NBC website that does not mention the training school she built and the economic impact she had on the convention and how her fundraising model of Women's Day remains a staple in NBC affiliated churches.

Although not addressed fully in my research, I would like to have a deeper discussion of what it looks like to be disempowered. When discussing what women feel disempowered by, some remained silent while others responded that they do not give anyone power over them. For those who stayed quiet, underlying issues could have disempowered them, and they may have believed commenting would deem them as weak amongst their peers. I had these conversations, which need to be one-on-one. I also noticed that out of the ones who spoke up, one has a leadership role within the church, and the other has a ministry outside of the church where she has a platform and has conducted workshops for churches within the community and at State religious conferences. This could be the reason for their confidence.

Self-care is important to me, and it was mentioned briefly during the focus groups. Dr. Angela D. Sims says, "With a little creative imagination, coupled with a commitment to love yourself regardless, purposely schedule moments and spaces to

which you can retreat to embrace the work that your soul must have to survive and thrive.”⁹⁸ During this program, I took a class on mindful meditation and learned how to relax my body, clear my mind, remove distractions, and embrace nature. I was reminded of the importance of centering oneself to return to work, become productive, and think clearly. A mentor reminded me of the importance of self-care. Although it has not been recorded in the accounts of Miriam or Nannie Helen Burroughs, this is a strategy clergywomen should embrace. There is a time to retreat to refuel in order not only to survive but to thrive. Soul work cannot move ahead without soul care.

This project will strengthen the camaraderie of clergywomen. It will provide a training model that targets identified areas of support that are needed. When this project is implemented, we will see the transformation and evolution of women in ministry. The project will impact not only the faith community but society as a whole because ministry outside of the pulpit is especially needed, given the political climate of our nation.

Clergywomen who serve in a pastoral capacity become truth bearers and share the challenges they have had to overcome and the hurdles they have had to jump. They need to share how advocacy and the resilience of our foremothers served as a model for them.

⁹⁸ Townes, *Walking through the Valley*, P. 105.

Final Thoughts

Although I am not aware of any women within the NBC other than Nannie Helen Burroughs, who went against the status quo to fight for her school, it would not be out of bounds to advocate for women's leadership in preaching on the main stage at the convention and the most popular, late-night service. These platforms have been designated for men without any pushback from women. For this reason, this structure continues to live within the convention. However, preaching platforms are available for clergywomen within the women's auxiliary, and there are leadership roles within the Congress of Christian Education, but no preaching opportunities within the parent body.

I grew up when I knew only three female Baptist preachers: Dr. Carol Ann Knight, Dr. Gina Stewart, and Dr. Arlene Churn. They were models for me before the first woman was licensed at the church of my youth. These were my models in ministry while not having yet been exposed to women serving in ministry outside of the pulpit. I remember when the first female was ordained at my home church and how she would shrink while sitting on the pulpit because there was no support or sisterhood for her. Today, there are tens of clergywomen whom we could model ourselves after. The twenty-first-century clergywomen are bi-vocational and bring expertise and vocational skills to ministry. We are therapists, social workers, lawyers, nonprofit executives, and more. We are visionary leaders and curators of safe spaces on and off of social media.

In employing strategies for liberatory leadership and bringing into discussion womanist theology, it cannot be raised without referencing the mother of Womanist

Theology, Dr. Delores Williams. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, she suggests “that if black liberation theologians want to respond to the questions about black liberation theology’s bias against black women, they must assume an additional hermeneutical posture - one that allows them to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this “invisibilization” of black women’s experience.”⁹⁹ For the clergywomen to employ liberatory strategies, I would caution them not to succumb to the pressures of patriarchy within the institutional church and to be unapologetically their authentic self. Black Clergywomen continue to come to the rescue of the church, but must realize to also rescue each other.

My final reflection on this research is that this is important work. This is needful work. Employing strategies specifically for clergywomen is transformational work. It is liberating work. It is foundational work and fundamental to the future and health of our church spaces and our society. Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs have left us an undeniable legacy of advocacy and resilience throughout their lives. In the words of Nannie Helen Burroughs, I ask, “What is hindering the sisters from helping?” If the church is a hindrance, there are several organizations outside of the church construct who are doing the work of liberating clergywomen. Some organizations are The Gathering Church, Pink Robe Chronicles, the Circle of Sacred Fire, and Women RISE Mentoring Network. These organizations are accessible and available to empower and equip clergywomen of all denominations, especially those within the Black church context.

⁹⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 132.

These spaces have been curated by leading womanist scholars who provide safe spaces to learn, grow, and become the future leaders they are destined to become.

Appendix A

Methodological Approach

Overview

This project explores and expands ethical understandings of what empowers and disempowers Black clergywomen's leadership using case studies on the biblical character of Miriam and Nannie Helen Burroughs, a historical leader within the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. These two case studies were selected to provide a biblical and historical basis for examining liberatory leadership. The framework of this project integrates historical analysis, practical theology, and theological reflection to develop strategies for liberatory leadership for clergywomen.

When sharing data, the participants were identified by “minister” and a number. To protect the anonymity of each participant, no names are listed in the findings, nor are any stories that may potentially identify participants used.

Participant Criteria

Participants of the focus groups were female members of the Associate Ministers Fellowship of the Community Baptist Church who were Baby Boomers and Gen Z, and were either licensed or ordained. My approach was to engage twenty-five percent of the female clergy, or at least nine participants. Participants were recruited via email and face-to-face, stating that their participation is strictly voluntary and that there will be no compensation.

Although all participants were members of the Community Baptist Church of Englewood, they lived in different locations. Most clergywomen lived in the surrounding towns of Hackensack, Teaneck, and Englewood, New Jersey. One participant lived in Haledon, New Jersey, twenty minutes from the church, and one lived in Harlem, New York.

Data Collection Method

This project used a qualitative approach shaped by a commitment to listening deeply to the lived experiences of clergywomen. Stories were gathered through focus groups held on Zoom, providing a safe and sacred space for participants to reflect on their journeys in ministry. Permission to record was granted, and participants were informed that the recording contents were confidential and would solely be viewed by me, the focus group facilitator. The transcripts from these conversations were carefully reviewed and analyzed to discern common themes and spiritual insights. These focus groups offered an opportunity to provide a safe space to honor the voices of clergywomen who have faithfully served the church, bearing witness to their leadership, resilience, and call.

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