Beyond the Eulogy:

Bridging Spiritual, Cultural, and Therapeutic Care with Sacred Healing Spaces for Black Women in Grief

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Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a, yenkyi.
It is not wrong to go back and fetch what has been forgotten.
— Akan Proverb (Sankofa)

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Since ancient times, women across all ethnic groups have gathered to heal and nurture one another. Today, in some places, these moments are not welcomed, but it's necessary.
Sisterhood heals, not destroys, and this divine right should be afforded to all!

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Introduction

Grief wears many faces. It comes in silence, sobs, resilience, and rage. It walks beside mourners in hospital rooms, prayer circles, and cemeteries. It walks with us in our everyday lives as unspoken words, holding tears, silent screams, and physical pain. It lives within us as anguish and, at times, symptoms of mental health distress. As British psychiatrist Dr. Colin Murray Parkes shares, "grief is the price we pay for those we love."[1]

For those of the African diaspora, it is not just the sorrow of death. It is the mourning of systems designed not to support, but to perpetuate racial and gender-based violence. It names what is continuously held against us. It is the lack of inclusive physical and mental health support and the absence of emotional and spiritual care. It is the weight of ongoing systemic barriers and societal biases that continue to shape our lived experiences. Grief is the ache of being part of a community that is systemically overlooked. It is the burden of staying strong while being seen as less than human. It denies us the space to grieve, to mourn, or to express what we carry. We suffer in silence, often barely holding on.

For Black women, the aforementioned obstacles are compounded by gender bias and the specific burdens women carry. Public health scholar Arline T. Geronimus names this reality through the concept of "weathering". She describes how the cumulative impact of racism, sexism, and chronic stress accelerates physical decline and worsens health outcomes among Black women This process reveals how the daily weight of discrimination and structural inequity wears the body and spirit over time.[2]

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[1]Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Study of Grief in Adult Life* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[2] Arline T. Geronimus, *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2023).

It points to the particular burdens Black women uniquely bear. Deborah Gray White, Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History and Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, documents the historical conditions that shaped Black women's lives under systems of racial and gender oppression.[3] Contemporary public health research such as that of J.J. Chinn further shows that African American women experience a disproportionate number of health challenges.[4]

This is not just theoretical. It shows up in real and painful ways. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black women are approximately three times more likely than White women to die from pregnancy-related complications.[5] They are also more likely to raise children on their own. Approximately 67 percent of Black mothers are single parents, compared to 42 percent of Latina mothers and 25 percent of White mothers.[6] Women are often devalued within patriarchal social structures. As Deborah Gray White[7] and Patricia Hill Collins[8] demonstrate, Black women frequently navigate overlapping systems of race, gender, and class that limit access to empathy, resources, and support systems. These realities shape their lived experiences and deeply influence how grief is carried, expressed, and, too often, left unsupported. Women are often devalued within patriarchal social structures. Black women have limited access to the empathy, resources, and support systems available to others. Many are left to navigate the

[3] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South.* rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
[4] J. J. Chinn et al, "Health Equity Among Black Women in the United States," *Journal of Women's Health* 30, no. 2 (2021): 212–219.
[5] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System," https://www.cdc.gov/maternal-mortality/php/pregnancy-mortality-surveillance-data/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternal-mortality/pregnancy-mortality-surveillance-system.htm.
[6] U.S. Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements," https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/families.html
[7] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
[8] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 252.

compounded burdens of race, gender, and class in relative isolation. These realities shape their lived experiences *and* deeply influence how grief is carried, expressed, and, too often, left unsupported.

Malcolm X delivered a powerful address in Los Angeles in 1962 following the funeral of Ronald Stokes, a member of the Nation of Islam who was killed by the Los Angeles Police Department. He declared, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."[9] Through these words, he exposed the systemic mistreatment and marginalization of Black women in American society. This statement remains widely cited as a poignant reminder of the intersectional struggles faced by Black women. Women whose pain, trauma, and heartache are often spiritualized, minimized, or ignored. In another speech, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?", Malcolm X challenged his audience to consider who taught Black women to despise their features, their hair, and their very being. This question exposes the deep psychological and cultural impact of racism. It reveals how oppression is not solely external.[10]

The African race has been deliberately dehumanized in the service of a racial caste system. This began with the forced abduction and enslavement of Africans who were brought to North America to provide unpaid labor and build wealth for Europeans.[11] As Isabel Wilkerson explains in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, this hierarchy was intentionally constructed to preserve white dominance and justify centuries of exploitation. Africans and their descendants have been valued primarily

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[9] George Breitman and Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 12–14.
[10] Educational Video Group, "Malcom X - "Who Taught You To Hate?", YouTube Video, 3:14, September 9, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Re8EYUH1dD8.
[11] Nikole Hannah-Jones, ed., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

for their "free" labor, natural resources, and physical endurance. Despite enduring profound and generational atrocities. These atrocities include the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation. They also include the Civil Rights struggle, police brutality, and the murders that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. These injustices continue today in the form of systemic racism in healthcare and the justice system.[12]

The Willie Lynch Letter and the Making of a Slave is a short, modern pamphlet falsely attributed to a Caribbean slaveholder. In this work, the author claims that Willie Lynch traveled to North America to instruct enslavers on methods to control enslaved Africans and quell revolts. Lynch describes how to "break" African women through systematic and brutal suppression. This included physical violence, forced breeding, unrelenting labor, and rape on behalf of slave owners. These were designed to destroy family bonds and ensure economic control.[13] The text depicts the psychological manipulation used to break the spirit of enslaved individuals, especially women.[14] These methods of manipulation aimed not only to keep Black people enslaved physically. They were also intended to subjugate them mentally, emotionally, financially, and spiritually.[15] *Willie Lynch Letter* is not a historically verified document. However, scholars note that its enduring circulation reflects a collective awareness of the generational trauma and systemic racism that have shaped Black life and consciousness in the Americas.[16]

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[12] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).
[13] Ibram X, Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 35.
[14] Manu Ampim, *The Willie Lynch Letter: The Making of a Slave* (Chicago: Lushena Books, 1999).
[15] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Uptone Press, 2005).
[16] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

Legal scholar Kimani Paul-Emile expands this discussion. She proposes that throughout society, "Blackness" itself can function as a form of socially constructed disability. "Blackness, like disability, is an immutable characteristic that has historically been and continues to be the basis for social prejudice, discrimination, and legal disadvantage." Within this framework, racial subordination operates much like ableism. It restricts access, opportunity, and participation in public life. Not because of inherent incapacity, but because of systemic inequity. For Black women, this disabling reality is compounded by sexism. It produces what can be understood as a "twofold disability" of race and gender. Black women navigate racialized barriers that function like disability discrimination. They simultaneously confront gender-based marginalization in healthcare, education, leadership, and political life. This intersectional marginalization mirrors the Americans with Disabilities Act's concept of "substantial limitation" of life activities. In this case, this limitation is spiritually produced rather than medically diagnosed.[17]

These dynamics are not confined to secular institutions. The Black church must be examined as part of the social structures that have reinforced gender hierarchies. The Black church has historically served as a vital site of resistance, refuge, and liberation for Black communities. However, womanist theologians remind us that it has not always fully recognized or affirmed the experiences of Black women. Scholars such as Jacquelyn Grant[18] and Emilie M. Townes[19] make clear that patriarchal assumptions within church leadership and theology render the struggles,

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[17] Kimani Paul-Emile, "Blackness as Disability?" *The Georgetown Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2018): 293–367.
[18] Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus:Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).
[19] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/99567256/Womanist_Ethics_and_the_Cultural_Production_of_Evil.

grief, and spiritual authority of Black women invisible. Within this caste-like system of racial and gender hierarchy, the treatment of grief for Black women is shaped by expectations imposed by both society and patriarchal structures. This results in additional layers of complexity. Even in the midst of profound loss, grief is filtered through the lens of culture, the weight of historical trauma, and the constant pressure of societal expectations that demand strength. It is done so through the framework of inherited resilience, communal responsibility, and the enduring expectation to remain emotionally and spiritually steadfast. These pressures are reinforced within faith communities. Women are expected to serve, nurture, and remain spiritually resilient, while being given little space to fully express their sorrow.

This writing does not indict the church alone. It is an invitation to deepen pastoral care and theological reflection. This work is not a manual: it is a sacred offering. I am an ordained Baptist minister, a mother, and a Black woman who has wrestled with loss and continues to rise while carrying both the weight of grief and the witness of grace. I invite you to journey with me from heartbreak to healing, holding grief in one hand and grace in the other. This is my testimony: a bridge built from the rubble of sorrow and a prayer whispered through brokenness.

My Experience with Grief

LaKinda Gazel Gittens was born on April 27, 1984. Three days later, I was told she had Sickle Cell Anemia. As a young mother, I did not know what that meant. She looked beautiful, vibrant, and full of life. The doctor who delivered her said, “she will have a life of pain.” That did not make sense to me at the time. All I saw was my healthy baby girl.

LaKinda did live in pain. She required regular blood transfusions. At age 15, she was diagnosed with Lupus. Until she was 23 years old, we spent countless days and nights in hospitals. She was placed in medically induced comas several times, underwent chemotherapy, and was on high doses of steroids.

LaKinda's biological father and I were not in a long-term relationship. We had very little communication after her birth. He was incarcerated when she was still an infant and later deported to his home country of Grenada. Because of this, he was not a consistent presence in her life. Instead, LaKinda came to know members of his family. This included his parents and siblings. I eventually married later in life. My former husband and I were together for thirteen years and married for three. The relationship was not perfect, but he was present and supportive during LaKinda's early years. He stood with me through the long, difficult days we spent in the hospital caring for her. In those moments, when uncertainty surrounded us, having someone there to share the weight of those days mattered.

These early experiences shaped my understanding of caregiving and the many forms support can take. For Black women, the journey of raising and caring for children is carried within complex networks. They can be fragile, yet deeply rooted in resilience, faith, and community. Over time, the weight of caregiving, uncertainty, and emotional strain began to place tremendous pressure on my relationship with LaKinda's stepfather. Like many families navigating chronic illness, the demands of hospital visits, medical crises, and constant vigilance slowly took their toll. Our marriage began to unravel. Eventually, LaKinda's stepfather filed for divorce.

At that point in my life, I did not yet have the language to name what I was experiencing. I was living through layers of trauma, grief, and loss without

understanding that grief takes many forms. My focus was on caring for my daughter and trying to hold together what remained of a failing marriage. I rarely stopped to consider my own needs or well-being. It was during this season that I joined St. Paul Community Baptist Church. I turned to the church as a place for spiritual grounding and emotional support. I made plans to attend Pastor Johnny-Ray Youngblood's women's conference in Dallas, Texas in March of 2007. The original plan was for LaKinda to remain home with our extended family, her aunts, uncles, and cousins. But, just before the trip, LaKinda asked if she could come with me. I consulted with her doctor, who reassured us that there was a hospital nearby where her colleague worked. With that in mind, we decided to travel together. On March 15, 2007, we left with the church to travel to Dallas.

LaKinda began having trouble breathing and developed a fever on the night of March 16th. I rushed her to Baylor Women's Hospital the following day. She was intubated within five hours of arriving. What was supposed to be a five-day trip became a heartbreaking extended stay. LaKinda and I remained in Dallas from March 17th until April 23rd. I returned briefly to New York to inform my family about what had happened and to gather belongings. Within two days, I returned to Texas and stayed at a more affordable hotel near the hospital. Thankfully, the hotel provided transportation to and from the hospital, as I did not drive.

April 23, 2007. I received a phone call around 8:00 am from the hospital. LaKinda suffered a major stroke. I was told to go to the hospital immediately. I was frozen. I lay in bed, unable to move. In my heart, I already knew. I knew this was the end. The day before, one of the nurses had pulled me aside and said something that stayed with me: "She's not going to make it." She explained that LaKinda's stomach had become distended. When they suctioned her breathing tube, pieces of flesh were

coming out and her lungs were deteriorating. With God, I got up. I showered. I dressed. I went to the hospital. LaKinda was unconscious. I kissed her. I hugged her. I told her I was there and I would never leave her. A few minutes later, the doctor came in and said they were taking her for a CT scan to determine how much damage the stroke had done to her brain. Somehow, deep inside, I understood what the scan would confirm. I held her again. I whispered that I was going to be okay, and, if she was tired, it was okay to go to sleep. And I released her.

As they rolled her into the elevator and the doors began to close, the doctor called a code. She died on the way. As I sit here writing this, a familiar knot tightens in my stomach a pain I have not felt since 1:00 pm on April 23, 2007, in the waiting room of Baylor Women's Hospital. Society tells us it is unnatural for a parent to bury their child. I was supposed to die before my daughter. LaKinda went to sleep four days before her twenty-third birthday, and that moment marked the beginning of my deep journey with grief. *How does one survive such a loss without the tools or space to do so?* What I came to understand over time was that grief did not meet me all at once: it arrived in waves. Fear, sorrow, and, eventually, silence. It came slowly. Not only in the moment of loss, but long before in the waiting rooms. In the needles and uncertainty, watching my daughter fight for her life. Grief became a quiet companion during those hospital visits. It lived in the look in her eyes when she was tired. In the tears I held back so that I could remain strong for her. In the isolation I felt it as my marriage was falling apart. I met grief in small moments when I realized that no one could fix what was happening: I would have to carry the weight of it all.

By the time LaKinda passed, my former husband and I were already divorced. In truth, I did not notice his absence during those final moments. My focus was

entirely on LaKinda. We faced several medical crises that brought her close to death in the year leading up to it. Each episode required my full attention, strength, and presence as her mother and caregiver. By the time she transitioned, my world had become completely centered on caring for her. My energy, my prayers, and my emotional capacity were directed toward walking with her through those final days. There was little room to reflect on who was or was not present in my life. My heart and mind were wholly consumed with being there for my daughter. The day I truly recognized grief was the day I lost LaKinda. That was when grief shifted from a shadow to a storm. It was the moment I realized grief was not temporary. Grief is a lifelong journey. Something I would carry not just as pain, but as memory, love, and purpose as well.

Grief reshaped everything about me. I was no longer a mother, a wife, or a woman of faith. I became a *grieving* mother. I was a woman marked by profound loss, but not destroyed by it. Grief became a vital part of my ministry, my message, and my mission to help others navigate death, loss, and suffering. Grief sits with me even now. To coexist with grief brings peace and strength. There is a quiet assurance that God is with me through every step and every decision. He never leaves me.

The Question: ***Where do Black women go to wrestle with and find comfort in their grief?***

This question underscores a historical and theological void. Within many Western faith traditions, spaces for lament have often excluded the lived realities of Black women. Their grief, shaped by racial trauma and gendered oppression, remains unacknowledged in both secular and sacred contexts. To address this absence, womanist theologians, such as Emilie M. Townes, call for the creation of healing

spaces that affirm the humanity, spirituality, and emotional depth of Black women. In these spaces, grief itself becomes an act of resistance and survival.[20]

The grief of Black women and men in America cannot be understood apart from the historical systems of racial violence and gendered oppression that have shaped Black life for more than four centuries. As Nikole Hannah-Jones explains in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, the dismantling of Black family structures began with the transatlantic slave trade. African women and men were stolen from their homeland and forced to endure unimaginable brutality. Their bodies became instruments of both labor and reproduction used to build a nation yet denied autonomy, dignity, and even the right to grieve.[21]

Womanist Theology: Biblical Women as Guides Through Grief

Womanist theology insists that the experiences of Black women are a valid and vital source of theological reflection. Womanist theologian, Jacquelyn Grant, critiques the erasure of Black women in both Black liberation theology and feminist theology. She notes, "Neither Black theology nor feminist theology speaks to the unique experience of Black women." Grant calls for a Christology that emerges from the lived realities of Black women, affirming their identity and agency as bearers of God's image.[22] Katie G. Cannon reiterates the moral wisdom embedded in the survival strategies of Black women. She argues that these strategies were developed in response to both racism and sexism, and constitute a form of embodied theological knowledge. "The struggle for integrity in the midst of oppression is the source of

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[20] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/99567256/Womanist_Ethics_and_the_Cultural_Production_of_Evil.
[21] Nikole Hannah-Jones, ed. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).
[22] Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus:Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

moral authority for African American women," Cannon writes.[23] In addition, Delores S. Williams offers a re-reading of the biblical figure, Hagar, as a prototype for the Black woman's experience. Cast out into the wilderness, Hagar encounters God as the One who sees and sustains her. Williams states that "survival and quality of life for African-American women are not dependent upon male rescue or patriarchal structures but upon God's provision and women's own resourcefulness."[24] This reading affirms that being both Black and a woman is not a spiritual liability, but a site of prophetic truth, embodied resistance, and sacred insight.

The intention of Black liberation theology was not to deliberately exclude Black women. It emerged in response to the racial oppression faced by Black people in the United States and sought to affirm the dignity and liberation of Black communities. In centering the struggle against racism, early Black liberation theology reflected primarily the experiences and perspectives of Black men. As a result, the specific realities of Black women and the ways racism and sexism intersect in their lives are frequently overlooked.

Rizpah: Grief as Protest and Sacred Resistance

In 2 Samuel 211-14[25] Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, a royal concubine of King Saul, experiences a mother's worst nightmare. The text does not explicitly state that Saul took her. However, the term "concubine" reflects a socio-political arrangement in which Rizpah's agency, status, and voice were constrained. In contemporary understanding, the term is often associated with sexual exploitation. She was never

[23] Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
[24] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).
[25] *NRSV*, (New York: National Council of Churches, 2021).

honored with the title of wife. Within this silence we hear echoes of too many women frequently relegated to sexual exploitation and the loss of dignity. Women are given just enough recognition to be used, but not enough to be protected.

By the time Rizpah enters the biblical narrative, Saul and his household already include wives and children. Some romantic readings suggest Saul was captivated by Rizpah's beauty. A critical reading, however, reveals a more complex truth: women and children are often named in Scripture when their presence serves political or narrative purposes. Nathan's rebuke of David (2 Samuel 12:8) reminds us that royal women could be transferred like property. David himself confines Saul's remaining wives and concubines, including Rizpah, in what can be described as "living widowhood" (2 Samuel 20:3). Former royal women were viewed as threats because their wombs could carry royal heirs. Kings could isolate or eliminate potential rivals to prevent the survival of a previous dynasty. Rizpah is one of the few women in Saul's household named in the biblical text. The designation of "concubine" reflects a socio-political arrangement that limited her status, agency, and security within the royal household. Her sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth, as recorded in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, occupied a vulnerable position within the royal lineage. Alongside five other descendants of Saul, they were executed and left unburied as part of a political decision intended to end a famine. This disregarded their humanity and dignity.

Rizpah is known for her prolonged, steadfast devotion and refusal to allow wild animals to defile their bodies. She maintained a vigil over her sons and refused to abandon them. This left them unburied in order for the atrocities committed against her family to never be forgotten. Rizpah camped beside their bodies for months. She

protected them from birds and wild animals. Her mourning was a form of protest. It was a sacred resistance to the injustice done to her family. Rizpah's actions moved King David to grant them a proper burial. This brought an end to the drought. Rizpah's silence was a testament to a mother's pain, love, and courage. Historians view Rizpah's story as a reassurance to us to be steadfast in our faith, as God can turn our most tragic moments into our most incredible triumph. The context reveals the inconceivable nature of the tragedy. Similar to the experiences of Black mothers today, Rizpah demands dignity for her children in death. She becomes a model for public grief and sacred resistance. She stood over the decaying bodies of her sons, refusing to allow them to be further dishonored. Long before that moment, however, she had been positioned within the household of a king who already had a queen. The Bible tells us nothing about how she came to be there, what he saw in her, or what she desired for herself. It does not tell us whether her circumstances were chosen or imposed. This reading exposes deeper questions: Who is translating the scriptures we have learned to receive as the Word of God? *Whose fingerprints, ideologies, and power structures have shaped the sacred texts we now proclaim?*

In 2 Samuel 3:7, Rizpah appears again in the narrative, yet the scripture leaves no space for her grief. What, then, is offered to her in place of loss? The text does not console her suffering or acknowledge the depth of her pain. During the political unrest of David's reign, violence finds her again. Without centering her voice, the narrative records an accusation involving Rizpah (2 Samuel 3:7–8), exposing how her body becomes entangled in the struggle for power. By the time David orders the execution of Saul's remaining descendants, Rizpah is a widow, a survivor of violence, and a mother. Her sons are killed as part of a political bargain in which she has no voice (2 Samuel 21:1–14). One is left to ask: *how can a woman bear so much?*

I have only heard Rizpah preached by Black Women. This is for good reason. We see ourselves in her story. Rizpah's tragedy teaches us that Black Women's stories hold gospel truth for *everyone* willing to listen. Black Women do not have a monopoly on grief. We see Rizpah's sisters in native mothers searching for their missing daughters, such as Latina Women trafficked across borders, paying for passage with their bodies. We see sisters in every marginalized Woman who dares to fight for the dignity of her children. Rizpah's grief extends beyond her own loss. It is a grief that speaks to the world. Her vigil beneath the open sky transforms mourning into sacred protest. It declares that love and dignity do not die with the body. Grieving Black mothers reveal this in the same way. From Mamie Till-Mobley's[26] mourning to contemporary women organizing rallies against gun violence, we see that mourning itself becomes a form of public theology. It is a lived sermon in which lament becomes resistance and sorrow becomes sacred refusal. Grieving Black mothers continue to reveal this truth.

Claudia Rankine writes in *Citizen: An American Lyric,* that Black grief is not only personal but political; it is shaped by racial surveillance and systemic dehumanization.[27] Black feminist writer and scholar, bell hooks, similarly describes mourning and love as deeply communal and as acts that resist isolation and domination. She argues that "healing is an act of communion," and that grief, as an expression of love, calls us back into relational accountability and shared struggle.[28] Womanist theologians, such as M. Shawn Copeland[29] and Kelly Brown Douglas[30] ,

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[26] "The Murder of Emmett Till," *The African American Experience: Civil Rights,* directed by Stanley Nelson, aired 2023 on PBS https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/till/.
[27] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).
[28] hooks, bell, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 2000).
[29] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
[30] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

further teach that public grief in the Black tradition is more than lament. It embodies theology: an enactment of faith that disrupts injustice and demands moral accountability. This Womanist framework offers a powerful lens through which we view Rizpah a mother, a survivor, and a sacred witness. Though her story appears only briefly in Scripture, it offers one of the most devastating and prophetic portrayals of holy grief. Rizpah endures sexual exploitation, political erasure, and state-sanctioned violence, all without a recorded word. Her body, presence, and persistence became her sermon. In Rizpah's acts for her unburied sons, she demanded what so many Black mothers continue to demand: dignity in death. Her presence moves the king to act; her silent protest compels justice. Yet before Rizpah was a grieving mother, she was a Woman made vulnerable by systems of power. A Woman whose name entered scripture only when her pain served the narrative. And yet, even within that marginalization, she resisted. Her body became a site of memory, her silence a sermon of protest. This project makes space for the 'Rizpahs' of today. Women whose grief has been politicized, mistranslated, ignored, or dismissed. Like Rizpah, they may be given no words, but their presence shakes the foundations. In sacred listening spaces, we make room for what Rizpah represents: not just grief, but grief that resists. Grief that protests. Grief that endures.

Job's Wife: A Mother Who Gave Grief a Voice

The Book of Job tells the story of a righteous man who loses everything: his children, his wealth, and his health. Yet, he refuses to curse God. His wife endured these same losses, but is only remembered for her anguished outburst: "Curse God and die!" Scripture gives her no name, no voice beyond this moment, and no account of her grief. However, her namelessness is significant. It reflects a patriarchal world

wherein women's identities were defined by their relationships to men; their suffering dismissed or forgotten. Women were held to impossible standards of silence and endurance. Job's wife became a mirror for countless women, especially Black and Brown women, whose pain has been rendered invisible by systems that demand strength, but deny humanity.

Rev. Tisha Dixon-Williams acts as Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton, NY. She notes that Job's wife's outburst is not a sign of faithlessness. It is an honest expression of grief. She embodies the experience of exhausted caregivers who hold families together until they finally break under the weight of unspoken sorrow.[31] Her reaction invites us to see pain not as weakness, but as a sacred truth. A necessary lament that demands to be heard. She is demonized in sermons that focus on her words rather than her wounds. Few recognize that she endured the same devastation as Job, while simultaneously bearing the emotional and spiritual weight of his suffering. All the while experiencing no acknowledgment of her own burden.

There was a celebration of Women's Herstory Month at St. Paul Community Baptist Church in March of 2025. During the event, Rev. Dixon-Williams illuminated these truths through a sermon that paired Job's wife with Viola Davis's powerful scene in *Fences*. In this scene, Davis's character, face soaked with tears, cries out, "I've been standing here with you!"[32] Comparatively, in the context of Dixon-William's sermon, we can see Job's wife was no longer a background figure. She became every Black woman who has stood, steadfast and grieving, beside those she loves. When I was in the congregation that day, something broke open for me. For the first time, I didn't just see Job. I saw his wife. Her pain, exhaustion, and courage

[31] St. Paul Community Baptist Church SPCBCTV, "SUNDAY SERVICE - March 16th 2025", YouTube Video, 2:21:15, (March 16, 2025), https://www.youtube.com/live/BIlxKr0mu4M.
[32] *Fences*, directed by Denzel Washington (2016, Paramount Pictures).

to speak the unspeakable. That moment reshaped how I understood grief as both sacred truth and prophetic witness.

Job's wife lost ten children. She lost her way of life. She lost her husband's presence. She became his caregiver. She watched his body break down, his skin covered in boils, his spirit covered in ashes. At that point in time, who cared for her? Who was checking on her heart? Who did Job's wife turn to when the grief became too much? Her words "Curse God and die" did not come from wickedness. They came from her grief, trauma, and exhaustion. She had reached the end of herself. Any Black woman who has cared for a dying spouse, raised grandchildren while grieving, or watched her child fade away knows this place. Job's wife reminds us that grief can sound like anger, frustration, and exhaustion. She shows that even the faithful can feel broken. Her story invites us to stop judging women for how they grieve and instead honor the sacred truth of their sorrow. Job's wife's spirit lives within every Black woman who has ever stood silently beside a hospital bed or a casket. Women who were forced to hold themselves together with prayer or whispered questions into the night. Her grief has a voice and so does ours.

At the edge of heartbreak, when the unspeakable finally occurs, Job's wife reminds us that honest lament is holy. Black women know this pain intimately. This is not because we do not love God, but because we feel forgotten. We are the caregivers, crisis managers, and spiritual backbones of our families and communities. We show up for everyone else. *But who shows up for us?* We have been taught to suffer in silence, to equate strength with faith. But even strength needs a place to lie down and weep. Instead of demonizing Job's wife, we must honor her. We must listen to the pain behind her words and create space for Black women who also feel overwhelmed,

overburdened, and are still expected to “bless the Lord at all times.” Her words were not the end of faith, but the beginning of an honest cry. A sacred step toward healing.

Job’s wife’s narrative compels a reexamination of how patriarchal frameworks shape the interpretation of women’s experiences in Scripture. Her namelessness underscores the historical silencing of women’s grief. Her response reveals that lament and honest expression of pain are not signs of weak faith, but integral to a theology of endurance and survival. Valuing Job’s wife’s story does more than reinterpret a biblical figure. It exposes the ongoing realities of women whose pain has been minimized or spiritualized. Her lament echoes through generations of Black women who have stood in the shadows of loss, bearing the dual burdens of grief and expectation.

Just as Job’s wife was left unnamed and unseen, many Black women experience grief in silence; their mourning hidden beneath the labor of caring for others. Her cry became a mirror that reflects the collective experience of women whose faith has been tested by suffering and sustained by endurance. It is from this place that we now turn to survey the lived realities of Black women in grief. All of the women whose stories reveal both the depth of sorrow and the sacred power of survival.

Modern Black Women Who Experience Grief

Grief manifests differently for Black women. We are often expected to carry generations of weighted expectations, responsibilities, and traumas while still smiling, showing up, and serving. We are the first called when someone dies. We act as the individuals who cook meals, arrange the services, and sing the hymns. Yet, we are rarely asked, “How are you feeling?” or “How is your heart?” Our grief is often

spiritualized, silenced, or dismissed with well-meaning but hollow phrases such as, "God won't give you more than you can bear," or "She's in a better place." But what about *this* place? What about the mothers who must bury their children, like Rizpah, who stood watch over the broken bodies of her sons as they turned to dust in the open air (2 Samuel 21:10–11). Rizpah's vigil was both grief and protest, a sacred defiance that insisted on the dignity of her dead. Her story lives on in the experiences of contemporary Black women who mourn in public, demanding truth, justice, and recognition.

When I think of Hyacinth Watson, I am reminded of Rizpah. Watson's son, Omar Watson, died mysteriously while traveling in Colombia. For five months, she searched for answers, facing silence from authorities until all she received was her son's suitcase filled with unfamiliar clothes and unanswered questions. Like Rizpah, she mourned in public. Her pain was transformed into protest and her lament became a demand for dignity. As of the publishing of *Beyond the Eulogy* in early May of 2026, she still has no answers to her son's death.[33]

Before Watson, there was Mamie Till-Mobley (November 23, 1921 – January 6, 2003), the mother of Emmett Till (July 25, 1941 – August 28, 1955). Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy brutally lynched in Mississippi after being accused of offending a white woman. The acquittal of his killers revealed the depth of racial violence in America. Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to hold an open-casket funeral transformed private grief into a prophetic witness. It forced the world to see what hate had done to her child. Her courage ignited a movement.[34]

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[33] Kara Fox and Christina Zdanowicz, "A Mother's Five-Month Search for the Truth about Her Son's Death in Colombia," (CNN, April 22, 2024), https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/22/world/hyacinth-watson-omar-colombia-intl-cnni.

[34] "The Murder of Emmett Till," *The African American Experience: Civil Rights,* directed by Stanley Nelson, aired 2023 on PBS https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/till/.

Decades later, Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin (February 5, 1995 – February 26, 2012), carried that same mantle of sacred grief. Fulton turned pain into purpose after her 17-year-old son was fatally shot in Florida. She became an author, advocate, and co-founder of the Trayvon Martin Foundation and Circle of Mothers, which is a healing retreat for women who have lost children to gun violence. Like Till-Mobly and Rizpah, Fulton reminds us that a mother's lament can become a theology of resistance and a public act of love that refuses to let death have the final word.[35]

These women, both biblical and contemporary, embody a lineage of faith that grieves out loud. Their stories reveal that lament is not a failure of faith but a profound expression of it. Through their cries, vigils, and acts of protest, they teach the Church that grief itself can be sacred ground, where sorrow meets strength, and where God's presence is found in the tears of the faithful. Together, these historical, cultural, and theological perspectives remind us that a Black woman's grief is not a weakness to hide; their grief is a sacred labor that deserves community, context, and care.

Black Women's Grief, Mental Health, and the DSM-5-TR

Death is the most common form of loss that society associates with grief. According to the Cleveland Clinic, "Grief involves coping with loss." Grief can accompany any event that disrupts or challenges our sense of normalcy or sense of self. Grief may arise in many forms and circumstances.[36] For instance, anticipatory grief occurs before a loss such as when someone is facing a terminal illness or

[35] Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, *Rest in Power: The Enduring Life of Trayvon Martin* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2017).
[36] Cleveland Clinic, "Grief," February 22, 2023, https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/24787-grief.

anticipating the impact of a natural disaster.[37] Ambiguous loss emerges when there is a lack of closure surrounding a loss. Throughout her work, family therapist Pauline Boss defines ambiguous loss as a form of grief that occurs when there is a lack of closure surrounding the loss. She describes it as a condition in which a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, or vice versa. This could include situations wherein a person is presumed dead but their body is never found or when a parent abandons their children, but the parent remains emotionally present in the children's memories.[38] Individuals may also experience "cumulative or layered grief" when navigating multiple losses over time. In such circumstances, one loss compounds another, creating a complex emotional and spiritual burden.[39] A parent grieving the death of a child may simultaneously mourn the end of a marriage that followed that tragedy. Grief may also accumulate when losses occur close together. One parent may pass away, only to have their other pass away months later. These layered experiences of grief intensify the mourning process. This makes healing complicated and prolonged. In addition to individual experiences, collective grief reminds us that communities and societies grieve together. Wars, natural disasters, school shootings, and pandemics produce far-reaching losses that alter what constitutes "normal" life. They leave groups to struggle collectively with reimagining a changed future.[40]

Disenfranchised grief occurs when a loss is not widely recognized or supported by society. As Kenneth J. Doka explains, this form of grief often includes

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[37] Therese A. Rando, "Anticipatory Grief: The Term Is a Misnomer but the Phenomenon Exists," *Journal of Palliative Care* 4, no. 1-2 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998), doi.org/10.1177/082585978800400122 3.
[38] Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[39] Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).
[40] Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

experiences such as the death of a pet, the loss of a same-sex partner, or other experiences deemed socially "lesser." Traumatic grief combines the pain of loss with the shock of trauma. This form of grief is associated with sudden or violent circumstances, such as accidents, homicides, or natural disasters; events wherein the emotional impact of the loss is intensified by the traumatic nature of the event.[41] This is seen in cases involving violence or accidents. Grief can also emerge in the absence of death. As Pauline Boss notes, losses such as the end of significant relationships, abandonment, or emotional disconnection can produce profound grief. This occurs even when the person is physically present and living.[42] Each of these expressions of grief highlight the many ways humans respond to disruption. They remind us that grief is not a single event. Grief includes a spectrum of emotional and spiritual experiences.

Society often expects Black women to appear strong, composed, and self-sufficient problem solvers and caretakers who hold everything together. Yet, even while embodying these expectations, Black women bear the weight of them as mandates rather than choices. They carry ancestral, generational, and present-day grief. They continue to navigate the full spectrum of loss, often silently and without the support that such sacred endurance deserves, a pattern that echoes throughout biblical narratives of suffering and perseverance. Black women's grief must be understood in the context of both personal loss and structural trauma. Historically, Black women have carried disproportionate burdens as caregivers, cultural preservers, and protectors of family and community while facing systemic racism and gender discrimination. These pressures do not disappear in times of grief–they intensify.

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[41] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* 5th ed. (Washington, DC: APA Publishing, 2022).
[42] Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Research shows that Black women are less likely to receive adequate mental health care despite higher exposure to traumatic events.[43] Stigma, cultural mistrust of medical systems, and lack of culturally competent providers as barriers.[44] Mental health interventions often fail to acknowledge the historical weight of the Maafa. Maafa is a Kiswahili term commonly used to describe the "great disaster" of the transatlantic slave trade and the enduring trauma of slavery, segregation, and racial injustice experienced by African-descended people.[45]

Unacknowledged and unsupported grief can contribute to complicated grief, depression, anxiety, hypertension, and other stress-related illnesses. Many Black women suppress their grief because of cultural expectations to remain "strong." This leads to emotional isolation and physical health problems.[46] The DSM-5-TR (Text Revision, 2022) has recently introduced Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) as a formal diagnosis. PGD describes a pattern of persistent and pervasive grief that lasts beyond expected cultural or religious norms for twelve months or more in adults. It is marked by intense yearning or preoccupation with the deceased and accompanied by emotional pain, identity disruption, difficulty re-engaging with life, and functional impairment. This recognition identifies grief that has become so enduring and debilitating that it requires specialized intervention.[47]

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[43] Camille Quinn, "African American Women and Mental Health: An Intersectional Approach," *Journal of Black Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2019): 171–197.
[44] Angela M. Neal-Barnett et al., "My Sister's Keeper: A Community-Based Psychoeducational Group for African American Women," *Journal of Black Psychology* 37, no. 3 (2011): 287–305.
[45]Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).
[46] Monica Williams and Thema Bryant-Davis, "African Americans, Trauma, and the Potential for Healing," *Cultural Clinical Psychology and PTSD*, ed. Anthony J. Marsella et al (New York: Springer, 2021): 211–230.
[47] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., Text Revision (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2022): 301–302.

Applying this diagnosis to Black grief requires cultural, historical, and theological caution. In African American communities, grief often extends beyond the twelve-month mark in ways that are not pathological. Annual commemorations, long-term memorialization, and extended storytelling function as essential cultural healing traditions[48]. Black grief is compounded by historical trauma, the Maafa, and by ongoing racialized loss through police violence, health disparities, and systemic neglect. These realities produce intense and enduring grief that is socially and spiritually appropriate rather than disordered.[49]

Without cultural competence, clinicians may misinterpret traditional expressions of mourning such as wailing, dancing, annual rituals, or ancestor veneration as symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). This leads to an over-pathologizing of culturally normative grief. The PGD framework centers primarily on the individual and on observable symptoms. It does not address the communal dimensions of healing or the protective role of rituals. These rituals could include Maafa remembrance, libation, altar-building, drumming, or Ubuntu-based practices. All of these center around the African philosophy of "I am because we are." They emphasize interconnectedness, community, compassion, and respect. Core practices include restorative justice, empathetic communication, participatory design, collaborative education, and consensus-driven leadership. These build social cohesion and collective well-being and offer forms of collective care that PGD does not account for. They remain vital to the emotional, spiritual, and cultural well-being of many African-descended people.[50]

[48] Monica Williams and Thema Bryant-Davis "African Americans, Trauma, and the Potential for Healing," *Cultural Clinical Psychology and PTSD*, ed. Anthony J. Marsella et al (New York: Springer, 2021): 211–230.
[49] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005): 121–125.
[50] Camille Quinn, "African American Women and Mental Health: An Intersectional Approach," *Journal of Black Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2019): 171–97.

For Black women whose grief is often intensified by the intersection of racism, sexism, and economic inequity, PGD's framework may fail to capture the full spiritual, cultural, and historical dimensions of their mourning. Ministry responses must integrate mental health awareness with culturally grounded, spiritually rooted care. The Maafa-Sankofa-Ubuntu model offers one such approach. It provides sacred, communal spaces where grief is honored, expressed, and transformed. Grief is no longer measured against diagnostic timelines. There is a necessity for the creation of collaborative care plans that link pastoral care with mental health advocacy and resources for members to face and receive treatment for physical ailments. Churches will find success in standing in the traditions of Ubuntu and holding grief in community while concurrently honoring Sankofa. This raises the importance of retrieving ancestral resilience in order to heal in one's present day circumstances. Grief care then becomes not solely a ministry of comfort, but a ministry of liberation.

Returning to Our Roots

Grief is not only a spiritual experience. It is a whole-being journey. Black women are too often expected to appear invulnerable or who are overlooked entirely. Their healing must engage every part of the self. The body carries grief. The spirit wrestles with it. Culture, memory, family history, and ancestral legacy all shape how we mourn and how we begin to heal. Too often certain parts of our experience remain unspoken: the anger, the exhaustion, and the memories we fear are too complicated or too heavy to share. True healing invites all of it into the light. Even the parts we have been taught to hide must be acknowledged, seen, and heard. We are not only spirits. We are bodies, emotions, histories, and communities. We are living stories, shaped by experience and deserving of holistic and reverent care. Within Listening Sessions, the

whole person is honored. Not only the polished testimony, but the tremble in the voice. Not only expressions of faith, but moments of doubt. This radical openness spiritual, emotional, cultural, and physical creates the conditions in which genuine healing can begin.

The circular form represents wholeness, continuity, and the eternal connection between the living and the ancestors. The African patterns honor ancestral wisdom and cultural memory passed through generations. The sunset and landscape symbolize transition rather than ending, while the tree reflects deep roots, family lineage, and enduring legacy. The birds represent the soul's journey and spiritual freedom. Candles signify remembrance and sacred presence as drums evoke community, ritual, and the heartbeat of a people. Together, the design affirms that life extends beyond death. Memory, story, and spirit live on beyond the eulogy.

Grief among Black women is a deeply layered experience that is not solely shaped by personal loss. It also originates from historical trauma, systemic injustice, and cultural expectation. This body of work explores grief care for Black women through theological, cultural, and pastoral lenses. It is multifaceted and weaves together various elements. These include the legal insights of Kimani Paul-Emile's argument that "Blackness" was created as social construct similar to disability[51] and the long-relevant prophetic voices of womanist theologians such as Jacqueline Grant[52], Katie G. Cannon[53], and Delores Williams[54]. Brought into this powerful

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[51] Kimani Paul-Emile, "Blackness as Disability?," *The Georgetown Law Journal* 26, no. 2 (2018): 293-367. https://www.law.georgetown.edu/georgetown-law-journal/in-print/volume-106/volume-106-issue-2-january-2018/blackness-as-disability/.

[52] Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

[53] Cannon, Katie G, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

[54] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

collage are the communal memory practices of Maafa and Sankofa. Especially the practices[55] that provide the frameworks of the African ethic of Ubuntu, which affirms the interconnectedness of all people[56].

While much has been written about grief in general pastoral care literature, the experiences of Black women remain underrepresented and underexamined. This gap is particularly troubling given the disproportionate impact of loss in Black communities. The overwhelmingly high rates of maternal mortality and chronic illness combine with the devastating presence of gun violence and racially and economically motivated murders. This creates a painful, cumulative weight of generational trauma. There remains no comprehensive, culturally grounded pastoral model that attends to the intersection of Black women's grief, historical trauma, and systemic inequity.

The purpose of this ministry model is to develop a pastoral model of sacred listening and communal healing that responds to the unique grief experiences of Black women. Through womanist theological reflection, cultural analysis, and pastoral practice, this study integrates these frameworks into an approach suitable for congregational care. In ministry contexts, grief care for Black women must be culturally relevant, spiritually grounded, and responsive to the realities of their lived experience.[57] The theological and pastoral practice of Maafa Sankofa requires a deeper exploration. St. Paul Community Baptist Church offers a powerful communal response to the realities faced by Black women. As previously mentioned, Maafa, a Kiswahili word meaning "great disaster," refers to the transatlantic slave trade and its

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[55] Asare Opoku, "Sankofa: African Thought and Historical Memory," *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 45-58.
[56] Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).
[57] Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (New York: Nkonimfo Publications, 1980).

enduring legacies of racial trauma. Sankofa, from the Akan language of Ghana, means "go back and get it," signifying the importance of retrieving wisdom and dignity from the past to move forward.[58]

Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. David K. Brawley, The Maafa Suite: A Healing Journey® has become a transformative performance-psychodrama rooted in Maafa theology and Sankofa reflection. Brawley describes the Suite as "a communal liturgy in motion, calling forth the sacred memory of a people and inviting them into a healing process that is both historical and personal." Through theatrical storytelling, music, dance, and ritual such as libation, procession, and call-and-response, the Maafa Suite confronts historical wounds while affirming the resilience of African-descended people. The Maafa Suite: A Healing Journey® represents a long-standing communal effort within St. Paul Community Baptist Church to confront the historical trauma of slavery and its enduring psychological and spiritual consequences. The concept acknowledges not only the historical event of enslavement, but its ongoing cultural, psychological, and spiritual effect on African-descended communities.[59]

The annual Commemoration of the Maafa at St. Paul Community Baptist Church began in 1995 under the leadership of its sixth pastor, Rev. Dr. Johnny-Ray Youngblood. Prior to initiating the commemoration, Dr. Youngblood engaged church leadership and the congregation in dialogue about the lingering effects of slavery. In response to the frequently posed question, "What is wrong with Black people?" Dr. Youngblood offered a prophetic reframing: "We have yet to mourn the loss of our ancestors." This insight became the theological and pastoral foundation for the Maafa commemoration, recognizing that collective healing requires collective mourning.

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[58] Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (New York: Nkonimfo Publications, 1980).
[59] David K. Brawley, "Where Do We Go From Here? Sacred Memory in a Black Church Context" (Doctor of Ministry diss., Drew University, 2021), 87.

In the years leading up to the development of the theatrical production, the church hosted lectures and presentations from a wide range of scholars, activists, and public intellectuals who helped deepen the congregation's understanding of the historical and psychological dimensions of racial trauma. Among those who contributed to this ongoing educational process were Dr. Marimba Ani, Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Dr. Na'im Akbar, Dr. Joy DeGruy-Leary, Dr. Cornel West, and Rev. Dr. James Forbes. These conversations challenged the congregation to confront the enduring legacy of slavery and racism and to recognize the importance of historical memory in the process of communal healing. Out of these dialogues emerged *The Maafa Suite…A Healing Journey*®, a powerful form of transformative theatre or sacred psychodrama. The production uses dramatic storytelling, music, and ritual to guide participants through the historical experience of Africans in the Americas, from the trauma of the Middle Passage to the ongoing struggles for dignity, identity, and liberation.

The Maafa Suite functions not merely as a theatrical performance but as a collective act of remembrance and mourning that invites participants to grapple with the psychological and spiritual aftermath of slavery. Scholars such as Joy DeGruy describe the lingering psychological impact of slavery as Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome. This emphasizes the importance of communal acknowledgment and healing.[60]

Since 2009, the work of the Maafa Suite has continued to evolve under the leadership of St. Paul's seventh and current pastor, Rev. Dr. David K. Brawley. Under his leadership, the production adopted a more continuous narrative structure. It moved

[60] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Uptone Press, 2005).

away from earlier vignette-style scenes and developed a more cohesive storytelling format. Pastor Brawley introduced a small-group model that allows participants in the production to remain connected throughout the year. This fosters deeper reflections on how the themes of the Maafa can continue to shape the church's ministry and outreach. The commemoration has expanded beyond the theatrical production itself to include educational workshops, museum tours, visits to the African Burial Ground, seaside memorial ceremonies, and partnerships with broader movements addressing racism and historical trauma. Over the years, the Maafa Suite has been presented in cities across the United States and internationally, inspiring similar commemorative programs in numerous churches and communities. Through this evolving tradition, the Maafa Suite has become a powerful communal ritual that confronts historical trauma while fostering collective memory, healing, and resilience. By inviting participants to remember what has often been suppressed or forgotten, the commemoration challenges the cultural silence surrounding slavery and its aftermath. The Maafa Suite functions as a communal lament and a form of prophetic truth-telling. Ethicist Peter J. Paris affirms that in African spiritual traditions, ritual "draws the community into active participation, allowing the people to embody both the memory of suffering and the hope of restoration." In the context of Black women's grief, the Maafa Suite provides a sacred container where lament is not a sign of weakness but an act of resistance, a refusal to allow erasure or silence to have the last word.[61]

The African ethical philosophy of Ubuntu deepens this communal approach to grief. Originating in the Nguni Bantu languages of Southern Africa, particularly among the Zulu and Xhosa peoples, Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of

[61] Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

humanity and the centrality of community. The proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* "a person is a person through other people" captures its essence. Desmond Tutu explains: "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."[62] Michael Onyebuchi Eze adds that Ubuntu is "a relational form of personhood, in which the self is constituted through others."[63] In a grief context, Ubuntu resists the isolating tendencies of individualism and affirms that one's pain and healing are inseparable from the life of the community.

The Bereavement Breakfast at St. Paul Community Baptist Church embodies Ubuntu in practice. Held during the annual Maafa observance, it creates a sacred and culturally resonant space for individuals and families, especially Black women, to name and honor their losses in the presence of a supportive community. This gathering is not simply a meal, but a liturgy of remembrance and solidarity. Drawing from African ancestral wisdom, biblical truth, and the lived experience of our people. Together, these rituals affirm that grief is held and healed within the community. Throughout *Beyond the Eulogy*, we walk through the reproduction of rituals and space for Black women and grief, referring to the Bereavement Breakfast in order to show the importance of different rituals and its use in the importance of our healing.

Libation is one of the oldest and most sacred rituals in African and African diasporic traditions. It is an act of pouring liquid, often water, wine, or another drink onto the ground while calling the names of those who have gone before us. It is both prayer and remembrance, invocation and blessing. Scholars of African spirituality such as John S. Mbiti and Jacob K. Olupona note that libation functions as a ritual act that acknowledges the continuing presence of the ancestors and affirms the

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[62] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999): 31.
[63] Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2008): 388.

interconnected relationship between the living, the departed, and the Divine. Within African cosmology, the ancestors remain active participants in the life of the community. The act of calling their names is a way of remembering and honoring their presence. This affirms that the living and the dead exist within an ongoing spiritual relationship.[64] To speak a person's name is to keep their memory alive; to pour libation is to symbolically nourish the spirit and invite ancestral wisdom into the present moment. Without fully understanding the historical and spiritual meaning of this practice, many members of the African diaspora continue the tradition in simpler forms, such as pouring a drink in remembrance of a loved one who has passed. At its core, libation represents far more than remembrance—it is a sacred act of connection that affirms continuity across generations.[65]

The Bible echoes a similar call to remembrance and generational testimony. The psalmist declares, "One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts" (Psalm 145:4). Within the context of the Bereavement Breakfast, the pouring of libation becomes an act of both Sankofa retrieving what is valuable from the past and Ubuntu, acknowledging our shared humanity. As we pour, we remember: *Your life touched my life; your story shapes my story.* The ritual begins with a vessel of water, or another drink, lifted high as words of invocation are spoken, thanking God for the gift of life and calling the names of our loved ones. After each name is spoken, a small amount of liquid is poured. This symbolizes that those who have gone before us remain present in memory, spirit, and communal life.

Light has long symbolized hope, divine presence, and spiritual guidance across religious traditions. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's presence is revealed

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[64] Jacob K. Olupona*, African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[65] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

through light, such as the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). In the New Testament, Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), reinforcing the symbolic connection between light, divine presence, and spiritual illumination. When we light the Community Candle, we proclaim together that love still burns brightly, even in the shadow of loss. The flame symbolizes the lives we honor, lives that continue to shine in our hearts and in our community's collective memory. Ritual scholars note that candles in communal worship often function as visible signs of remembrance and solidarity. They embody the presence of those who are absent while affirming hope in the midst of grief.[66] In many African and African diasporic traditions, light also carries spiritual meaning. They symbolize guidance, ancestral presence, and the enduring connection between the living and those who have gone before. Lighting this shared candle therefore becomes both remembrance and communal affirmation. As the candle burns throughout the gathering, its steady flame becomes a silent witness to shared grief and resilience. In this way, the Community Candle embodies the spirit of Ubuntu reminding us that our lives and our light are bound together. We remember together, we hope together, and we carry this light for one another.

Water has long carried sacred meaning across religious traditions. It gives life, cleanses, heals, and remembers. In many African spiritual traditions, water functions symbolically as a bridge between the visible and invisible worlds, connecting the living with those who have gone before them. Scholars of African spirituality, such as John S. Mbiti, affirm the ongoing relationship between the living and the ancestors within a shared spiritual reality.[67] Ritual scholars further note that the use of water in

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[66] Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998).
[67] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

communal ceremonies often represents purification, remembrance, and spiritual continuity between generations. As Malidoma Patrice Somé emphasizes, ritual elements such as water serve as conduits for healing and connection, restoring balance between physical and spiritual realms.

In the biblical tradition, water and tears also hold profound spiritual meaning.[68] The psalmist proclaims that God gathers human suffering with care, declaring, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8). Likewise, Psalm 126:5 reminds believers that "those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy." These scriptures affirm that tears are not signs of weakness but sacred expressions of lament that God receives and transforms. Pouring water during ritual makes visible what often remains unseen. Our tears are private, silent, and sometimes suppressed. They are honored here in the open, in the presence of God and community.

The act of pouring becomes an embodied prayer. It is a physical gesture that symbolizes release and trust. As the water is poured, grief is entrusted to God, with the hope that sorrow may eventually give way to healing. As the water flows, it mingles with the tears of others, reminding us that grief is not carried alone. This act embodies the African ethic of Ubuntu "I am because we are." This affirms that individual suffering is held within the life of the community. We pour water not to forget, but to remember. To honor the lives that shaped us and to acknowledge the sacred bond between those who have lived and those who remain. The ritual affirms the enduring truth that love is stronger than death; even tears may become the waters from which healing grows.

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[68] Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (New York: Penguin Compass, 1997).

An altar is a meeting place between heaven and earth, the living and the ancestors, grief and hope. In African tradition, it is where the community gathers to remember, honor, and connect with the spiritual realm.[69] In the biblical tradition, altars mark moments when God's people encountered the divine, such as Noah after the flood (Genesis 8:20), Abraham at the promise of blessing (Genesis 12:7), and Jacob after he dreamed of the ladder to heaven (Genesis 28:18–19). When we build a community altar, we declare that our grief is not hidden or private. It belongs to the whole community.[70] We bring photos, names, flowers, candles, cloth, and sacred objects that remind us of our loved ones. Each item is a story, a memory, a piece of enduring love that will never die. The altar is not only for looking back. It is a place of strength for moving forward. As each person adds something, they place their grief into a shared sacred space. This is Ubuntu in action: no one's loss stands alone. When the altar is complete, it becomes a visual sermon of faith, memory, and love. Even in death, the bonds between us are unbroken, and before it, we hear God's promise: I am with you always (Matthew 28:20).

Fire has long carried sacred significance across religious traditions as a symbol of transformation, purification, and divine presence. Scholars of religion, such as Mircea Eliade, have noted the symbolic role of elemental forces in mediating encounters with the sacred.[71] Cosmology scholars such as Jacob K. Olupona[72] and John S. Mbiti[73] describe such spiritual elements as mediators between the visible and invisible worlds. They allow prayers, intentions, and offerings to move symbolically

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[69] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).
[70] Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[71] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959).
[72] Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[73] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

from the human community into the spiritual realm. These elements are involved in many African religious traditions, including Yoruba, Akan, and Kongo.

Ritual scholars note that fire represents the power to transform what is offered, turning human words, prayers, and intentions into a form that can ascend beyond the physical world. Dagara elder and spiritual teacher, Malidoma Patrice Somé, describes ritual fire as an element of transformation that allows individuals and communities to release grief, restore balance, and communicate with the spiritual realm.[74] In this way, fire becomes more than a physical flame–it becomes a sacred instrument through which burdens can be surrendered and healing can begin. When we burn our written prayers, we participate in this symbolic act of transformation. Some prayers are cries for help, some are thank-offerings, some are confessions, and some are the unspoken ache of loss. As the flame consumes the paper, the prayer is released from our hands and entrusted to God. Fire becomes the visible sign of that release and transforms our written words into smoke that rises beyond what we can see.

Scripture also frequently associates fire with divine presence and revelation. God appears to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2) and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends as tongues of fire upon the gathered community (Acts 2:3). The psalmist echoes this imagery of rising prayer by declaring, “Let my prayer be set before you like incense” (Psalm 141:2). Burning our written prayers therefore becomes an embodied form of prayer. It is a ritual act that allows grief, hope, confession, and longing to be offered visibly before God.

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[74] Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998).

As the smoke rises, we are reminded that our prayers do not ascend alone; they rise with the prayers of the entire community, lifted together in the flame and carried by the Spirit. The Bereavement Breakfast reflects the Sankofa principle. It retrieves wisdom and strength from the past in order to move forward, and reinforces Ubuntu's conviction that "a person is a person through other people." In this sacred space, the community responds together: *Your loss is our loss; your healing is our healing.* Grief becomes a shared journey toward healing, rooted in the conviction that God's presence is often revealed through communal care.

Hush Harbors and Sacred Listening Spaces:

Grief, Worship, and Survival as Continuums of Black Women's Healing

Sacred listening sessions are necessary tools for our right to lament and affirm that our grief matters to ourselves, to one another, and to God. These are not merely meetings. They are sanctuaries, sacred spaces, where Black women can be held, heard, and healed. This sacred understanding of grief directly informs the ministry of care at St. Paul Community Baptist Church. In response to the deep and layered grief present within our congregation and community, St. Paul has sought to create intentional spaces where lament is not silenced, but witnessed; a place where healing is experienced through presence, prayer, and community.

The chapter titled "Race" in Dorothy Roberts' *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century,* explains how slavery commodified Black women's fertility. Slavery institutionalized a racial caste system that weaponized their motherhood. Enslaved Black women were forced to bear children who would themselves become property. Their reproductive lives were controlled for economic gain. Roberts demonstrates how myths about Black women's

bodies, sexuality, and supposed strength became embedded in law and culture. This erased their pain and legitimized their exploitation. These beliefs did not disappear with the end of slavery. They were absorbed into social institutions and constructs that continue to regulate and surveil Black motherhood.[75]

Journalist and author, Linda Villarosa, extends this history in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story.* In her chapter, "Medicine", she traces how medical racism and false beliefs about Black people's insensitivity to pain continue to endanger Black lives today. Physicians such as J. Marion Sims performed experimental surgeries on enslaved Black women without anesthesia. This reinforced the dangerous myth that Black bodies were naturally more tolerant of pain. These beliefs echo in contemporary medical practice. Studies have shown that Black patients are less likely than white patients to receive adequate pain medication. Their symptoms are also more likely to be dismissed or minimized.[76]

The consequences of these historical patterns are visible in present-day health disparities. Black women in the United States are significantly more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women, regardless of education or socioeconomic status. Conditions such as sickle cell disease disproportionately affect Black communities. The disease has received less research funding and public attention than diseases affecting predominantly white populations. These realities reveal how the intersection of race and medicine continues to shape whose pain is believed, how suffering is treated, and whose lives are protected within the healthcare

[75] Dorothy Roebrts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: The New Press, 2012).
[76] Linda Villarosa, ed. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

system. Understanding this history is essential for recognizing that structural racism in medicine continues to influence the care Black women and families receive today.[77]

In *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Men, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*, Traci C. West deepens this conversation by addressing the spiritual wounds that Black women and men carry. Those inflicted through silence, dismissal, and spiritual violation. These wounds cannot be healed by shallow theology or sentimental comfort. In Chapter 4, "Garnering Methods of Resistance," West argues that true healing begins by naming the harm and bearing witness to one another's pain. This creates liberatory spaces where Black women, men, and non-binary individuals are heard, seen, and deeply respected. She critiques theological frameworks that encourage individuals to "pray it away" or to endure suffering as a test of faith. She asserts that resistance itself is a spiritual ethic. West ultimately calls the church to accountability. She urges it to become a place of justice and restoration rather than somewhere that perpetuates silence.[78] Culturally, Black women and men are expected to be strong for everyone else; to carry generations of sorrow while smiling through the pain. We are praised for our resilience while our wounds remain untreated. Matriarchs who held families together despite systemic abandonment and women in pews today continue to grieve silently beside others who assume they are "over it." Our mourning has been forced underground. The idea of the "Strong Black Woman" may have helped many survive, but it has also demanded our silence.

Expectations of strength affect both Black women and Black men, however, the burden often falls differently on Black women. Black men are frequently

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[77] Linda Villarosa, ed. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

[78] Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Men, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

socialized to suppress emotional vulnerability. They hear messages such as "be strong". These discourage public expressions of grief. Black women are expected to endure hardship while simultaneously caring for others who are suffering. They are frequently positioned as emotional and spiritual anchors within families, churches and communities. They nurture, organize, pray, and sustain others, all while carrying personal grief. Their mourning is often hidden behind these responsibilities of caregiving and communal stability. This leaves many women to grieve quietly while continuing to support those around them. These accounts reveal that the grief of Black women has long been ignored, pathologized, or spiritualized without genuine care. Patriarchal structures dismiss women's grief and render it invisible. These dynamics fail to honor the particular nature of different forms of loss, such as pregnancy and infant loss. These often remain private, invisible, or unspeakable.

To fully understand what occurs after the eulogy, it is necessary to examine reproductive loss. This includes miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death. These losses occupy a liminal and unacknowledged space within both church and society. It renders the grief of women particularly Black women largely invisible. Reproductive loss is frequently left unaddressed. This leads to what scholars describe as “silent” or “disenfranchised” grief: forms of mourning that receive little public acknowledgment, ritual support, or sustained communal care. Scholars of grief, such as Kenneth J. Doka, note that experiences such as abortion may produce forms of disenfranchised grief that remain difficult to discuss openly within religious or social settings. Whether or not such experiences are publicly acknowledged, the emotional and spiritual realities surrounding reproductive loss often still remain hidden. This leaves women to navigate their grief in silence.[79]

[79] Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

Silent grief refers to forms of loss that receive little public acknowledgment, ritual support, or communal care. These are losses spoken of in whispers or not spoken of at all. While funerals and memorial services may mark the immediate moment of death, they do not always create space for grief that lingers long afterward. They do not account for losses that never receive ritual recognition. In such cases, grief remains present, but unseen. It is carried privately, not communally. Some losses are silent because they are uncomfortable, stigmatized, or difficult to name. Reproductive losses may go unacknowledged because there was no public life to mourn. Deaths caused by violence are often rushed past in the name of survival or exhaustion from repeated tragedy. Suicide frequently carries layers of shame, confusion, and theological uncertainty that discourage open expression of grief. In each case, the absence of ritual does not signal the absence of pain. It reveals the limits of communal language and pastoral response. Black women are especially affected by silenced grief. Historically and culturally, they have been expected to endure loss with strength, faith, and quiet resolve. This expectation is shaped by histories of racial violence, gendered labor, and survival. This posture leaves little room for lament or prolonged mourning. Grief becomes something to manage rather than something to express. In the context where I serve, wives, mothers, aunties, and grandmothers carry grief from miscarriage, violence, and suicide in deeply embodied ways that are rarely named.[80]

Black women's mourning has been rendered invisible by a society that refuses to see them as fully human. *Beyond the Eulogy* responds to this reality by creating sacred spaces where silenced grief can be brought into view. To understand Black grief today is to confront that history of dehumanization; to reclaim the long-denied

[80] Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

sacred space of lament and remembrance on behalf of ancestors from our homeland, our enslaved and free ancestors, and the generations who followed. Through ritual, naming, and communal witness, we see that no loss is too complicated, too painful, or too stigmatized to be held before God. Black bodies became instruments of both labor and reproduction. They have been used to build a nation while being denied autonomy, dignity, and the right to grieve. Enslaved Africans created what historians call the "Invisible Institution.". This was composed of the hidden religious gatherings that took place beyond the surveillance of slaveholders. These secret worship spaces functioned as both protest and preservation. They defied the control that enslavers attempted to impose over Black spiritual life. They created spaces where enslaved people could pray, mourn, and express hope without fear of punishment. Within these hidden gatherings, grief was expressed through embodied practices such as moans, spirituals, prayer, and silence. These sounds and gestures carried ancestral memory and communal strength. Far from being merely emotional expressions, they were sacred practices of survival that sustained enslaved communities in the face of violence and loss.[81]

Historian Jessica Millward reminds us in her work on enslaved and free Black women in Maryland, that the grief of enslaved women was not only personal. It was political, spiritual, and communal. She places these women at the center of the long struggle for African American freedom. She shows that their mourning carried memory, resistance, and generational wisdom. Their hearts were not only grieving, but sustaining and healing their communities in the midst of unimaginable suffering.[82] Creating sacred listening spaces directly challenges the cultural myth that Black

[81] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[82] Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

women must always be strong. They declare "*You do not have to be strong here, you can simply be."* Such gatherings honor what so many of our mothers and grandmothers were never given: the space to fall apart, to be cared for, and to begin again. Sacred Listening Sessions embody Traci C. West's[83] call to resist spiritual violence through collective care, theological truth-telling, and the creation of sacred ground where grief is no longer hidden, dismissed, or endured in isolation. Grief can now be held in community and treated as sacred. Today's Sacred Listening Sessions carry forward these intentions. They are not new innovations– they recover and retrieve the wisdom of our foremothers. Women who gathered in grief to survive, resist, and remember. These contemporary gatherings return us to embodied practices shaped by faith, nurtured through struggle; gatherings passed down through whispers, prayer, and song. They remind us that when grief is held collectively, it becomes not only bearable, but sacred.

Hush Harbors were secret gathering places created by enslaved Africans in the United States. Hidden in wooded areas, swamps, or behind cabins, these gatherings allowed enslaved people to worship, pray, sing, weep, and speak freely beyond the surveillance of enslavers. In these sacred nighttime assemblies, enslaved communities whispered prayers and sang spirituals in ways that protected them from punishments; it preserved their connection to God and to one another. Historians such as Albert J Raboteau[84] describe hush harbors as hidden worship spaces where enslaved Africans gathered. Womanist scholars such as Yolanda Pierce[85] expand on this by highlighting

[83] Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Men, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
[84] Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[85] Yolanda Pierce, In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit (New York: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

how Black women sustained inherited traditions of faith, memory, and communal care across generations.

More than worship sites, hush harbors were spaces wherein grief, hope, and resilience were held together. These gatherings offered room for emotional release, comforting touch, shared breath. The kind of soul-holding that made survival possible under conditions of constant threat. They preserved African religious memory and embodied ritual practices such as sacred rhythm, call-and-response prayer, and communal lament. In doing so, they nurtured a theology of liberation that proclaimed God as Deliverer and the One who hears the cries of the oppressed. This echoed the biblical story of Moses and the Israelites. Through these gatherings, enslaved communities strengthened solidarity and cultivated the spiritual imagination that would later give rise to the institutional Black church. Jessica Millward emphasizes that the grief of enslaved women was not only personal, but political, spiritual, and communal. In *Finding Charity's Folk*, Millward places enslaved and free Black women in Maryland at the center of the long struggle for African American freedom. She demonstrates how their grief carried memory, resistance, and generational wisdom. Their hearts not only grieved– they sustained their people and preserved the possibility of healing within their communities.[86]

What we now call Sacred Listening Sessions are contemporary expressions of this historic tradition. Albert J. Raboteau describes the hush harbor as part of the "invisible institution," where enslaved people's spiritual lives flourished beyond the control of enslavers. In these hidden sanctuaries, silence was sacred, moans were prayers, and listening to one another's sorrow became an act of revolutionary care.

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[86] Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

Healing emerged not through preaching alone but through presence, prayer, and communal witness.[87]

St. Paul Community Baptist Church's ministry stands within this lineage. By creating sacred listening spaces for Black women, the church is recovering a practice shaped by the ancestors and carried forward by generations of women whose grief was often permitted only under the cover of night. Yolanda Pierce affirms that Black women's spiritual traditions especially those passed down through grandmothers are deeply grounded in this hush-arbor ethos. Modern listening sessions continue this inheritance, creating sanctuaries where Black women can express grief, reclaim their stories, and be deeply heard without performance or pretense. These spaces are not merely therapeutic; they are theological, reviving the sacred hush where sorrow and silence are held with reverence.[88]

In the sacred work of walking alongside grieving Black women, space itself becomes a form of pastoral care. For too long, Black women have carried their pain silently, expected to remain strong even when their hearts were breaking. Sacred listening disrupts this expectation by offering a sanctuary where vulnerability is not only permitted but honored. To be sacred is to be set apart. Listening sessions begin with intentional ritual practices: prayer, breathwork, and moments of silence to mark the transition from public performance to communal presence. As Howard Thurman writes, "There must be a place… where the tired mind can be renewed." This renewal begins in stillness.[89]

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[87] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[88] Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (New York: Broadleaf Books, 2021).
[89] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953).

Safety within these gatherings is not assumed. It is intentionally cultivated. Trauma-informed practices establish clear boundaries. They offer participants the option to pass, maintain confidentiality, and encourage nonjudgmental listening that honors each woman's pace. As Aemina Razzano observes in *Healing Together*, trauma-informed spiritual care must "hold space for both silence and spirit," allowing individuals to determine the terms of their healing. In these sessions, no one is pathologized for crying too long, remembering too vividly, or naming systemic injustice as part of their sorrow.[90] Culturally grounded practices deepen this work. Black women's grief is understood not in isolation, but within a broader historical, communal, and spiritual story. Songs of sorrow and joy, ancestral naming, storytelling, and sacred pause echo the hush harbors of old. Joy DeGruy reminds us that Black healing must occur "on multiple levels: the individual, the family, and the community."[91] A womanist lens further shapes these spaces. Emilie M. Townes teaches that "to become whole and holy is to take the circumstances of Black women's lives seriously."[92] Sacred listening does not rush to fix those circumstances. Instead, it bears witness to them. In this communal witnessing, grief becomes a spiritual offering. Traci C. West affirms that true healing emerges through community, shared resistance, and prophetic love.[93]

This project does not create something entirely new– it recovers something ancient. It stands with Rizpah, who kept vigil over the bodies of her sons as an act of public lament and sacred protest. It listens for the moans of foremothers who

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[90] Aemina Razzano, *Healing Together: Trauma Informed Care for Spiritually Integrated Communities* (St. Petersburg, FL: Tehom Center Publishing, 2025).
[91] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Uptone Press, 2005).
[92] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/99567256/Womanist_Ethics_and_the_Cultural_Production_of_Evil.
[93] Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

whispered their grief into the night. It honors the legacy of the hush harbor, where people gathered to survive together. And it dares to affirm that the grief of Black women today is not something to overcome, but something to behold, tend to, and transform. Sacred Listening Sessions continue this continuum of refuge, resistance, and renewal. They create holy ground where Black women can lament freely, pray boldly, and imagine a future where their grief is honored and their healing is communal.

When grieving sisters enter this space, they are greeted gently. The environment is warm, welcoming, and affirming a place where tears are honored and silence is safe. The room is arranged intentionally, with soft lighting and chairs placed in a circle to foster intimacy and equality. Each woman's story is treated as sacred ground. Some will speak. Some will weep. Some will sit quietly. All of it is holy. This is how healing begins, not only with scripture and song, but with one another. When grief is witnessed, it begins to transform. Sisterhood does not erase sorrow, but it creates space for sorrow to breathe. We are not meant to grieve in isolation. We are meant to grieve in community, in rhythm, and in resistance.

When grief is shared, it becomes lighter; when many hands hold healing, it becomes holy. bell hook mentions that "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion." These words offer profound insight into the nature of healing, particularly for women navigating the terrain of grief. They point us toward a truth that many of us have lived through, but is not consistently acknowledged: the journey through sorrow is not one we were ever meant to walk alone. For women, especially Black women, this quote unearths the sacred necessity of collective care, spiritual sisterhood, and the powerful bonds of shared experience.[94]

[94] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 2000).

Grief is often framed as a private matter, a personal burden to bear in solitude. However, this solitude can be intense for everyone else. We are told to keep it together, to be pillars for our families, and to soldier on. Yet, beneath the surface, many of us are unraveling. Grief isolates not because it must, but because our society makes little room for its messiness. When bell hooks presented the radical idea that community is not just comforting, it is essential. For Black women in grief, healing begins when we are witnessed. When another Black woman looks into our eyes and says, “me too.” When someone sits beside us in silence and holds space for our tears. Communion, in this context, is not only about sacrament. It is about sacred connections and sisterhood. It is the unspoken understanding that if someone else has walked this road, someone else sees our pain. It affirms that in their presence, we can begin to breathe again. Communion as healing does not mean fixing one another. It means accompanying and bearing witness to someone else’s sorrow, allowing them to feel it fully without shame or interruption. This is the heart of grief circles, of therapeutic listening spaces, and of women’s retreats and prayer gatherings. These are places where healing happens. Not through a cure, but through care.

Black women know what it is to be denied the full expression of grief. We are so often expected to be resilient, even in the face of unimaginable loss. Our tears are sometimes met with suspicion as a sign of weakness. In such a world, isolation becomes a survival mechanism, but survival is not healthy nor healing. To survive something insinuates that pain and suffering had to be overcome. Healing takes more than strength. Healing requires softness, spaciousness, and the presence of those who genuinely understand and care. How does this apply to grief? We challenge the individualistic ways grief is often framed when we embrace healing as an act of communion. We begin to imagine healing as something shared. Something that

unfolds in circles, through songs, around meals, in whispered prayers, and in open arms. It invites us to lay down the weight of doing it alone and find the courage to say, "I need help. I need people. I need God and my sisters." When women come together in grief, something holy happens. The room becomes a sanctuary, the silence becomes prayer, and the shared stories become balm. This is the communion bell hooks spoke of. Not just bread and wine, but the bread of presence and the wine of understanding.[95] We offer it to one another in laughter through tears; in the "I've been there"s or the unspoken glances. All through knowing nods and outstretched hands. "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation " is more than just a sentiment, it is a theology (Mark 1:32-35). It is a practice and an invitation for every Black woman navigating grief. It reminds us that we are not alone. Healing is possible, but it does not happen in isolation. It is sacred work done together in communion with God, our sisters, and the stories that help us remember who we are and who we are still becoming.

A distinction between listening and hearing is widely affirmed in spiritual traditions, trauma-informed care, and Black womanist literature. Howard Thurman writes about the renewing power of sacred stillness and attentiveness, suggesting that deep listening allows individuals to encounter both the voice of God and the inner truth of the human spirit. For Thurman, stillness creates the spiritual space where genuine understanding and compassion can emerge.[96] Trauma scholar Laura van Dernoot Lipsky urges caregivers and helpers to approach others' suffering with presence and humility. In her work on trauma stewardship, she emphasizes that authentic listening requires resisting the urge to fix or control another person's pain

[95] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 2000).
[96] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953).

and instead bearing witness to their story with care and respect.[97] Similarly, Parker J. Palmer describes the practice of "circles of trust," where individuals gather in spaces intentionally designed for deep, nonjudgmental listening. In these circles, participants listen without interruption, advice, or correction. This allows each person's story to be honored as sacred.[98]

Womanist theologian Emilie M. Townes reminds us that listening is an ethical act that requires attentiveness to the lived experiences of marginalized communities, particularly Black women whose voices have often been ignored or silenced.[99] Likewise, contemplative teacher Valerie Brown emphasizes that mindful and compassionate listening can create spaces of healing where individuals feel seen, respected, and valued within the community.[100] Together, these perspectives affirm that listening is more than simply hearing words. It is a spiritual, ethical, and communal practice that makes room for truth-telling, healing, and transformation.

Hearing involves passive words that enter through one's ears, but may never touch the heart. Listening, by contrast, is sacred and active. It requires full engagement of one's spirit, attention, and empathy. It is not merely processing someone's words. It involves reverent reception of the person behind them. Listening says: "I am here, fully. I hear the pain beneath your words. I honor your silence. I do not need to fix you. I will witness you." This gives space for Black women's humanity. When a Black woman says, "Are you listening to me?" It is more than a

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[97] Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).
[98] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
[99] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/99567256/Womanist_Ethics_and_the_Cultural_Production_of_Evil.
[100] Valerie Brown, *Hope Leans Forward: Braving Your Way Toward Simplicity, Awakening, and Peace* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022).

request, it is a cry to be seen, held, and respected in her fullness. It is not merely, “Can you hear me?” but “Will you honor what I am carrying?” Listening Sessions are sacred responses to that question. They are not just gatherings, but sanctuaries. They are places where grief breathes, pain speaks, and silence is holy. In these circles, the sacred act of listening becomes the first step toward healing.

Opening the Listening Session: A Liturgy of Belonging

Each of our Listening Sessions begin with a spoken welcome that grounds participants in the sacredness of the space:

“In this space, you are not just heard, you are listened to.

We are not here to fix, correct, or rush you.

We are here to hold space for your story, your silence, your sorrow, and your strength.

You are safe here.

You are seen here.

You are sacred here.”

These words function as more than an introduction– they serve as a liturgy of belonging. They establish the tone for what will follow. Not advice, correction, nor judgment, but presence. Within this spiritual framework, every story is honored and every silence is respected. The welcome affirms that each Black woman’s grief, joy, and complexity are worthy of reverence. It reminds participants that they do not need to perform strength or suppress sorrow in order to be received with care. Within these sacred walls, healing does not begin with solutions. It begins with being seen, being listened to, and being believed. Every woman’s story is treated as sacred ground. No

one is forced to speak. No one is rushed. No one is corrected. Each person who enters the space is gently reminded: *You are seen. You are heard. You matter.*

Sometimes healing does not begin with answers. Sometimes it begins with the simple but powerful experience of being listened to lovingly, reverently, and sincerely. These Listening Sessions are offered as a sanctuary where Black women can come as they are and discover that their grief is not too much, their sorrow is not too heavy, and their voice is not too small. This work is not about doing more. It is about being more present. It is about creating a soft landing place for grieving hearts. In doing so, we honor not only our sisters, but also God, who Scripture reminds us is "near to the brokenhearted" (Psalm 34:18). In *Sisterhood Heals*, Dr. Joy Harden Bradford explores the distinctive nature of grief experienced by Black women. It is a grief compounded by trauma, racism, and relentless expectations. She offers a radical, yet deeply affirming vision. Healing is not only possible, but sacred within the context of community. Her work underscores what many Black women already know intuitively: shared grief opens the door to collective healing.[101] As a response to this understanding, we work to build a space at St. Paul Community Baptist Church called the 'Listening Session.' It is not therapy nor a workshop. It is a sacred space: a place where women can come and *be*; to exist without judgment, without the need to be fixed, and without pressure to perform. The emphasis is on presence, not platitudes. Greeters and hosts will be trained to practice deep listening, honor silence, respond with presence and compassion. They will bear witness to other's pain without trying to repair it. This ministry is about listening with the heart, not speaking for comfort.

[101] Joy Harden Bradford, *Sisterhood Heals: The Transformative Power of Healing in Community* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2023).

The need for training in sacred listening is well supported in both theological and trauma-informed literature. Howard Thurman emphasizes the spiritual importance of inner stillness and presence.[102] In *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky urges caregivers to practice self-awareness and presence as ethical responses to others' pain.[103] Emilie M. Townes affirms that health and healing among Black women require community and ethical attentiveness.[104] Parker J. Palmer writes that "the human soul does not want to be advised or fixed or saved; it simply wants to be witnessed to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is."[105] Likewise, Valerie Brown emphasizes that "listening with presence is an act of compassion that creates the conditions for healing."[106] To hold a sacred space with the care and reverence it deserves, those who welcome grieving women into the Listening Session must be trained in the practice of deep, intentional listening. Listening in this context is not merely waiting for one's turn to speak. It is about being fully present. It means hearing not just the words, but the weight behind them. It is honoring the pauses, the tears, the silences, the anger, and the sacred truths that may finally find their voice for the first time.

Our training is focused on several key areas. Participants will learn active listening, which involves truly hearing and receiving someone's story without interrupting, without judging, and by resisting the urge to fix it. Non-verbal communication is emphasized. This includes body language, eye contact, and physical stillness as tools of silent support. Sacred Silence is practiced and recognizes

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[102] Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond: IN: Friends United Press, 2001).
[103] Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).
[104] Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006).
[105] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
[106] Valerie Brown, *Hope Leans Forward: Braving Your Way Toward Simplicity, Awakening, and Peace* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022).

that, in many moments, the holiest response to grief is presence, not words. Cultural sensitivity is also essential. Those who serve must realize the unique grief burdens Black women carry and honor them without comparison, dismissal, or minimization. This training fosters self-awareness and enables listeners to remain mindful of their own biases, emotional triggers, and the tendency to solve problems rather than support others. Gigi Gilliard Development (GGD) was engaged to design and facilitate a two-part Active Listening workshop series led by me. The sessions were conducted as two half-day workshops. Attendance was voluntary, not mandatory. Across both sessions, attendance averaged 20–22 participants. This reflected strong interest and commitment despite the non-required nature of participation.

Consultant Report Purpose

This C.O.R.E. Report (Commendations, Observations, Recommendations, and Evaluations) reflects:

- Direct observation during both workshops
- Facilitator reflection and pattern analysis
- Post-session participant evaluations (SurveyMonkey)

The intent of this report is to offer clear, proportionate insight aligned to the scope of the engagement. It supports future learning, research, and programmatic refinement.

Commendations

1. Voluntary Participation and Readiness to Learn:

One of the most notable strengths of this engagement was the high level of voluntary participation. Attendance was not mandated, yet both sessions were well attended. In adult learning environments, voluntary attendance is a strong indicator of intrinsic motivation and readiness to learn. Participants arrived engaged, curious, and prepared to actively participate. Adult learning research consistently demonstrates that learner openness and motivation are critical predictors of impact. The group was willing to show up and be fully present. This set a strong foundation for meaningful engagement.

2. Depth of Openness and Rapid Cohort Coalescing:

A striking commendation was the speed and depth with which the group coalesced. Learning cohorts typically require time to build trust and psychological safety, even when participants share organizational or community affiliation. In this case, the group moved quickly into authentic, vulnerable sharing. They often offered examples that went beyond surface-level commentary. Participants shared real-life experiences from personal, professional, and ministry contexts. This vulnerability demonstrated a rare and significant level of trust and group affinity. This rapid coalescing suggested:

- **A strong, unmet need for safe conversational spaces:** participants were "ready" for a place to share, open and discuss behavioral traits in a way that they do not ordinarily get to do.
- **Appropriate container-setting**: appropriate "atmosphere-setting" wherein participants feel psychologically safe and where they will be listened to. This leads to more personal vulnerability and willingness to lean into adult learning spaces.
- **Group willingness:** a readiness within the group for deeper reflective work.

This dynamic served as both a strength of engagement and a signal of opportunity for future learning design.

3. In-person Facilitation Effectiveness:

Participant feedback rated facilitation as "Excellent" (100%), and qualitative comments reinforced feelings of being heard, respected, and supported (please see more in the "evaluation preparation and methodology" section, pg. 51). The facilitation style allowed participants to engage cognitively, emotionally, and relationally. The goal was to create a learning environment aligned with best practices in adult education and psychological safety. More importantly, there was a redeeming quality of the "in-person" sessions evident in these workshops. In the face of online and virtual sessions, the in-person experience seemed to land and resonate with leaders wanting to learn more about active listening.

I. Observations

1. Active Listening as an Entry Point, but Perhaps Not the Core Need:

While the stated focus of the workshops was active listening, an important observation emerged across both sessions: participants were less focused on solely learning listening techniques and more focused on understanding where listening breaks down.

Participants arrived with:

- Ready examples of miscommunication.
- Frustration around not being heard or understood.
- A desire to unpack assumptions, interpretations, and missed cues.

This suggests that active listening functioned as a gateway topic. As we discussed active listening, it became evident that other challenges in communication arose (staying focused, not being cared for when wanting others to listen, etc.). These points open the door to broader conversations about communication norms, relational dynamics, and meaning making.

2. Assumptions, Silence, and Communication Style Differences:

A recurring theme was the tendency to assume meaning in silence. We saw this theme emerge particularly interpreting quietness as disengagement, avoidance, or emotional distress.

Participants expressed a desire to learn how to:

- Listen without projecting meaning.
- Resist filling gaps with assumptions.
- Honor differences in communication style.

This observation extended into discussions of intergenerational communication, where participants acknowledged that expectations around verbal responsiveness, pace, and expression often differ across age groups and cultural contexts.

3. Learning Space as a Surrogate for Everyday Dialogue:

Another key observation was that the workshops became a space where participants processed everyday communication breakdowns that often go unaddressed in regular community or leadership settings. The eagerness to share sometimes urgently suggested a lack of routine, structured opportunities to reflect on communication

behaviors in real time. This reinforces the idea that the workshop met a latent need, not merely an educational one.

4. Evaluation Participation and Methodology:

Post-session evaluations were completed by 5 participants, despite higher in-room attendance. This gap is notable and important to contextualize. Given that the survey was distributed after the sessions and completed asynchronously, it is likely that timing and delivery methods affected response rates. This observation is not a reflection of disengagement, but rather a design consideration for future evaluations.

II. Recommendations

1. Expand Opportunities for Structured Dialogue:

Given the depth and immediacy of participant sharing, it is recommended that future programming:

- Allot additional time for guided dialogue.
- Create smaller breakout or affinity-based listening spaces.
- Offer follow-up sessions focused specifically on communication breakdowns.
- Call participants “in” when noticing a lack of active listening during the session experience.

This would allow participants to process lived experiences more fully while maintaining psychological safety.

2. Strengthening Evaluation Capture Methods:

To improve evaluation participation and data validity, it is recommended that:

- Evaluations are completed in the room prior to participant departure.
- A QR code is displayed with protected reflection time (5–7 minutes).
- Facilitators clearly frame feedback as part of the learning process.

Research consistently shows that in-session evaluation capture significantly increases response rates and data quality.

3. Align Programming with Research Rigor (Where Applicable):

For workshops that intersect with research questions, particularly those related to listening, gender, race, or leadership, it is recommended that:

- **Qualitative and/or quantitative data be gathered intentionally.** In real time, this might look like a specific gender focused survey for just “women” or just “women leaders”/“women leaders who are providers in faith-based grief or trauma counseling.” In session, the anecdotal point that “women aren’t listened to” was shared as a basis for the workshops. Anchoring this point with quantitative or qualitative data pre-workshop (or as part of the introduction within the workshop) strengthened the research rigor of the hypothesis.
- **Focus groups or listening labs** could be conducted with defined demographics.
- **Pre-work:** to listen to the community through a pre-workshop survey that gathers insight into participants’ experiences with active listening.

In this work, claims and hypotheses are not only formed in theory but are tested and refined through lived experience, honoring the voices and realities of those most affected. This approach strengthens both the learning experience and the credibility of conclusions drawn.

4. Consider Targeted or Affinity-Based Sessions:

Based on observed dynamics, future offerings might include:

- Affinity-based listening groups (e.g., women, generational cohorts).
- Sector or role-specific communication workshops.
- Listening labs designed for research and reflection.

These formats may allow for deeper exploration of themes surfaced during the sessions.

III. Evaluation from participants

Quantitative Collection Summary: Survey Summary (n = 5):

Although the response size was limited, results were highly consistent and directionally strong:

- 100% strongly agreed they felt actively engaged.

- 100% would recommend the workshop.
- 100% found the content valuable and applicable.
- 100% rated facilitation as Excellent.

Qualitative Feedback Themes:

Participant comments emphasized:

- Feeling heard and affirmed
- Gaining a new perspective on listening.
- Application to personal and professional life.
- Desire for broader dissemination of the work.
- Interest in non-verbal communication (e.g., body language).

While findings are not generalizable due to sample size, the consistency of responses meaningfully reinforces observed engagement and impact.

IV. Closing Reflection

This engagement demonstrated that active listening is not merely a skill to be taught, but rather a relational practice deeply tied to trust, identity, and belonging. The workshops brought both individual insight and collective need. The conversational and casual coalition-building offered a strong foundation for future learning, research, and community-building efforts.

GriefShare

In October 2017, St. Paul Community Baptist Church launched its GriefShare ministry.[107] Revered Dr. David K. Brawley asked me to serve as the servant leader for a Christ-centered grief support program that he had been introduced to by a friend during his own time of transition. GriefShare is a 13-week, video-based program designed to help people navigate the journey of grief. This is done through biblical teaching, group discussion, and mutual support. Each session features expert insights on grief recovery. Conversations revolve around real-life stories from people who

[107] The Church Initiative, "GriefShare," last modified 2026, accessed May 1 2025, https://www.griefshare.org/healing.

have experienced loss. Practical tools for coping are shared for those who need them. Participants are encouraged to discuss their experiences in a safe, supportive setting that fosters spiritual growth and emotional healing. Within this theological vision of Maafa, Sankofa, and Ubuntu, my leadership of GriefShare takes on greater significance. Recognizing the Maafa allows communities to confront the collective grief and historical wounds that continue to shape the lives of many Black families today. Alongside this understanding is the principle of Sankofa, an Akan concept from Ghana that means "to go back and retrieve what is valuable from the past." Sankofa reminds us that healing often requires remembering rather than forgetting. By returning to ancestral wisdom, cultural memory, and spiritual practices that sustained earlier generations, communities can recover resources that help them move forward with strength and clarity.[108] Equally as important is the ethic of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a philosophy widely expressed in Southern African traditions and often summarized by the phrase, "I am because we are." This phrase reflects what John S. Mbito describes as the fundamentally communal nature of human identity.[109] Ubuntu emphasizes the deep interconnectedness of human life and affirms that one person's suffering affects the entire community. Within this worldview, healing is not an individual journey, but a communal responsibility in which people carry one another through seasons of sorrow and restoration. It is within this theological and cultural framework that my leadership of GriefShare takes on deeper meaning.[110]

GriefShare is a Christian grief recovery program developed by Church Initiative that provides structured support for individuals mourning the loss of a loved

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[108] Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 25-35.
[109] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108–109.
[110] Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996).

one. The program typically follows a thirteen-week format and includes video teachings from pastors and grief counselors, group discussions, and personal reflection exercises designed to help participants process the emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges of grief. While GriefShare offers a strong framework for grief support, the curriculum was not originally designed with the cultural experiences of Black communities in mind. At St. Paul Community Baptist Church, we have worked intentionally to adapt the program so that it reflects the lived realities, spiritual traditions, and communal values of our congregation. While we continue to follow the core structure of the curriculum, we have expanded the program to include conversations and practices that resonate deeply within our cultural and spiritual heritage. One way we do this is by acknowledging the presence of the ancestors and the biblical concept of the "great cloud of witnesses" described in Hebrews 12:1. Within many African and African diasporic traditions, ancestors are understood not simply as those who have died, but as those whose lives continue to guide, shape, and inspire the living. Naming our ancestors and remembering their stories becomes a way of affirming that we do not walk through grief alone. In the Christian tradition, this understanding resonates with the belief that those who have gone before us remain part of the communion of saints, surrounding us as witnesses to God's faithfulness across generations. Another important adaptation has been the incorporation of ritual practices within our gatherings. Rituals are structured symbolic actions that allow individuals and communities to express emotions that are often difficult to articulate with words alone. Practices such as lighting candles, pouring water, offering libations, or writing and releasing prayers create sacred space where grief can be expressed, witnessed, and held within the community. We have also incorporated a movement component that acknowledges the connection between grief

and the body. In New York, this has included kickboxing sessions offered through our wellness programming, while participants joining virtually from other locations are encouraged to engage in any form of physical activity that supports emotional and mental well-being. These practices recognize that grief affects the body as well as the spirit and that healing often requires movement, community, and spiritual grounding.

We began hosting in-person group sessions every Saturday. This offered a supportive, faith-based environment for individuals navigating the pain of personal loss. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and in-person gatherings ceased, Dr. Brawley recognized the growing need for grief support within our congregation and community. Many were losing loved ones to the virus. In response, he instructed the church to transition GriefShare meetings online to continue ministering to those in mourning. Moving to a virtual format opened the door for even greater reach. Our first 13-week online GriefShare session welcomed 45 attendees. This included participants from as far away as Kenya, Africa. What began as a local, in-person ministry quickly became an international space of comfort, connection, and healing. After the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions were lifted, under the guidance of Pastor Brawley, we reviewed our participation and decided to leave GriefShare as a virtual program. This allowed us to serve both domestic and international participants and welcome them to join our sessions and find support during their time of loss. This digital model continues to serve as a vital lifeline for individuals and families seeking comfort and community in their journey in grief.

As I lead GriefShare I witness women, like Hyacinth Watson, struggling to hold themselves together.[111] The pain is visible, raw, and sacred. Black Women often

[111] Kara Fox and Christina Zdanowicz, "A Mother's Five-Month Search for the Truth about Her Son's Death in Colombia," (CNN, April 22, 2024), https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/22/world/hyacinth-watson-omar-colombia-intl-cnni.

grieve deeply and in silence, carrying invisible burdens. Yet when we do make space to tell the truth and speak the pain aloud, healing becomes possible. We need spaces that do not merely preach to us, but sit with us. We need churches, small groups, and sister circles. Within these, we can fall apart and be held. Neither fixed nor judged, but heard. GriefShare has become that sacred space. A place where tears are holy, silence is honored, and every story of loss is met with care, compassion, and community. When I look back over my experience with grief, it is not just the loss that comes to mind. It is the long, winding road that led me there. It is the years of caretaking, living in hospital rooms, and holding onto hope while watching my daughter battle two chronic illnesses. It is the quiet strength required to be a mother, nurse, advocate, and a prayer warrior all at once. Grief did not begin on the day my daughter LaKinda passed away. It started long beforehand. It started the day she received her first diagnosis and continued to show up in the form of uncertainty. As I watched her in pain and heard doctors continuously explain new diagnoses and frightening treatments, the grief always arrived when I had to be strong for her. Even when I was falling apart inside. It settled in the silences between hospital beeps. Within the prayers whispered at night. Embedded in the knowing glances exchanged between nurses who had walked this path with other mothers before me.

Grief also disguised itself in the quiet unraveling of my marriage. Within the loneliness that came when the one who had promised to walk beside me turned away, I was left to navigate LaKinda's illness, my heartbreak, and the uncertainty of our future on my own. At the time, I did not have the language to understand what I was experiencing. Looking back, I now recognize that I was living with anticipatory grief for nearly twenty-three years as I walked with my daughter through the long uncertainties of illness. I now know that I was grieving the loss of my marriage while

simultaneously moving through a new emotional terrain. A process that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes as the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.[112] Yet even in those seasons of overwhelming sorrow, I was not truly alone. The church became my refuge. St. Paul Community Baptist Church gave me more than a place to worship. It gave me a spiritual family and a place where I could exhale, cry, and feel held. It gave me strength when my own strength had run out. The day LaKinda died, something inside me shifted forever. A part of me went with her. But even in that moment, I heard God whisper to me. *You are still here and there is more for you to do.*

Now, when I look at grief, I no longer see it as only pain. I see it as sacred. I view it as a companion that has shaped my faith, ministry, and calling. I see it in the eyes of the Women I now counsel, in the mothers who sit across from me in silence, waiting for the words that might help them breathe again. Grief has taught me that healing is not forgetting: it is remembering. It is remembering with love. It is building something meaningful out of what broke you. It holds space for grief and hopes to coexist with it, allowing them to live side by side. And so, I continue to walk, pray, serve, and share. Because in telling my story, I honor LaKinda's life. And in helping others walk through the valley of grief, I live out the calling God placed on my life the day He gave her to me. I must lift and give thanks to the faithful Team GriefShare who have walked alongside me in this ministry. From 2017 to 2023, Monica Britton and Elder Michael Lee served faithfully from the very beginning, helping to lay a strong foundation for our work. I am also profoundly grateful to Elder Bruce Booker, Leslyn Quashie-Noel, Yvonne G-Durant, Yvonne Hildmon, who served as our administrator from 2023 to 2024, and Jeanetta Thomas-King. Each has given their

[112] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

time, compassion, and prayer to help carry this ministry forward. Their steadfast presence has been a living example of what it means to serve with both heart and excellence, and embody the very spirit of comfort and community that GriefShare represents. Even with the support that GriefShare provides, an important pastoral question remains: how can we deepen our care for those who grieve? Too often grief support is limited to the immediate days following a loss. But grief does not follow a predictable timeline. Long after the funeral service has ended and the condolences have faded, many individuals find themselves navigating the quiet and often lonely work of mourning.

This raises the question that sits at the heart of this project:

Where does one go when the eulogy is over?

Beyond the Eulogy – The Gathering

Beyond the Eulogy exists to create sacred spaces for Black women to grieve, remember, and heal in ways that honor their stories, strength, and cultural memory. Rooted in Afrocentric wisdom and spiritual care, we hold grief as holy, storytelling as medicine, and remembrance as a sacred act of resistance, dignity, and love. We envision a world where Black women are no longer required to grieve in silence,

carry sorrow alone, or remain strong without being held. *Beyond the Eulogy* seeks to restore ancestral practices of remembrance, sacred listening, and communal care so that Black women may heal, be witnessed, and live fully beyond their losses.

Beyond the Eulogy – The Gathering took place on Saturday, March 21, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Of the 77 people who answered my grief survey, 23 women attended. The in-person event focused on grief, loss, and ancestral traditions, particularly within the African diaspora and the Christian faith. The women began to arrive and Team Nia, a group of volunteers and supporters, wore white and greeted each participant. Team Nia is made up of carefully selected volunteers who were a part of the Active Listening session a few months earlier. They collectively named themselves ‘Nia’, which means 'purpose' or 'intention' in Swahili. The space was decorated to honor each woman's identity, blackness, boldness, and beauty. Playing during the event was a carefully curated playlist containing gospel and Rhythm & Blues songs, both of which carry themes of love. This music accompanied people as they entered the space and during their breaks. Stations around the room, including our ancestral altar, showcased different representations of Black women. They did so through beautifully made art, drawings, and photographs of both famous and unknown black women. Included as well were self-care, pampering, and journaling tools. A video of Malcolm X’s 1962 speech in Los Angeles played on a loop. While Black women have been discounted as worthy of love and protection, Minister Malcom affirmed that our DNA and existence are the blueprints that shape the world.

Once everyone had arrived and settled into a circle, I welcomed each guest, and Nana Afia, my spiritual advisor, offered wisdom and grounding, helping us remain aligned with the deeper spiritual currents guiding this work. She opened the

event and then guided attendees through the libation practice. This Ghanaian spiritual tradition honors the creator; water is used as a symbolic space for purification, renewal, and emotional release. Next, attendees were invited to view deceased loved ones as ancestors not only in a different realm but still present in our earthly forms, including those who died under untimely circumstances. Participants were encouraged to call their ancestors' names and join the ritual, which serves as a means of connection, healing, and affirmation.

Next, the event transitioned into a sharing circle. To set the tone for the day, I made sure participants knew they were in a safe space to share stories and acknowledge the ongoing impact of loss. I also emphasized that grief is an expression of love and connection. Attendees were encouraged to honor their ancestors, embrace vulnerability, and support one another. This progression reinforced the strength and resilience found in shared traditions and community. Attendees introduced themselves and talked about their grief and loss. They shared experiences of losing parents, siblings, children, partners, and friends. The losses were often sudden or traumatic. Many of the women had experienced reproductive loss. This included miscarriages, still births, and termination of pregnancy for various reasons. These events may have happened many years ago, but are still deeply felt. At times, multiple deaths happen in one family in a short period. Many shared the experience of being seen as strong, but struggle to express or handle grief, as they were never taught in their upbringing to do so. As a result, this hindered their own grieving processes. Others shared feelings of isolation and a longing for the support of those who have passed. Regardless of specific reasons for their grief, there is an overarching struggle to express vulnerability due to cultural or familial norms. Participants discussed the need for safe spaces to be open. They told stories that revealed feelings of sadness and numbness as

well as the presence of gratitude for others' support. While they shared their sorrow, Team Nia members and I validated their feelings. We reiterated that grief is not weakness– it is love and connection. I led the program and discussed ancestors, spiritual practices, and personal rituals for coping with grief. The gathering built unity, healing, and support, and encouraged people to honor their feelings and the strength of their traditions; it offered a safe place to share stories and recognize the lasting effect of loss. It showed that grief is love and connection. Attendees were encouraged to honor ancestors, be open, face their struggles, and find strength in each other and in their ancestors' legacy. This highlighted the resilience of shared tradition and community. The main theme was the link between grief and love. We were able to get participants to a place where their pain showed how much they cared.

In the latter part of the session, stories emerged of people reflecting on anniversaries of loss, the impact of losing children, and the challenge of navigating grief as both a leader and a mourner. The role of support networks in navigating this new normal was also discussed. Participants noted the need for spaces where grief is not pathologized, but honored and witnessed. The session closed with affirmations of collective strength and the enduring presence of ancestors. The event showed the importance of community in healing. People found relief in sharing without fear of judgment. Spiritual habits like prayer, rituals, and calling on ancestors brought comfort and helped people feel connected. As our last act, we asked participants to place photographs and memorabilia of their loved ones on our altar of remembrance and discussed how they could also create their own altars at home. We also made space for participants to write their prayers and messages to their loved ones and place them in a collection container, which I prayed over. This reinforced the message that grief is not a burden but a testament to love and heritage.

Our agenda was as follows:

1. **Welcome**
    a. Thank participants for coming!
    b. Explain Dissertation
    c. Introduction of the team
2. **Ritual: Libation round rules**
    a. Creating Psychological Safety and Safe Space
    b. Room for your voice, emotions, including tears and outbursts
3. **What women go through, what we hold.**
4. **Introduction of the participants**
    a. Name
    b. Who are you holding that has brought you here today?
5. **Community Altar**
    a. Define what it is.
    b. Prayer
    c. Participants – Two at a time
        i. Saying their loved one's name
        ii. A small prayer
        iii. Placing their picture of a memento on the altar
6. **Temperature Check**
7. **Circle of Comfort – Conversation**
    a. Culture
        i. As a culture, is what we do in support of those who have lost a loved one enough?
    b. Grief Support
        i. What do you do for support?
        ii. Did it work? If yes, why? If not, why not?'
        iii. What would you like to see in a support group?
        iv. How can the church best support you in your grief?
8. **Temperature Check**
9. **Lunch**
    a. Pair people off based on the number of people.
    b. Each group discusses:

i. What would you like people to understand about your grief?

ii. Have you gone to counseling, and if so, did it help?

1. If you went, but it didn't help, why not?
2. If you didn't go, why not?

10. After Lunch:

a. Share answers to the above questions.

b. How did this make you feel?

11. Temperature Check

12. Group Activity

a. Candles in the water

i. Write their prayer on paper.

13. Temperature Check

14. Closing

a. Circle of Prayer

i. Ensemble in a circle, hold hands, and pray for us and each other.

b. Evaluation

Evaluation Results

Of our 23 participants, 16 completed the evaluation. The following are both the quantitative and qualitative results of the evaluation:

- Overall, 93.8% of the participants answered they thought the presentation was 'Excellent', while 6.3% rated their experience 'Very Good'
- 100% of the participants who completed the evaluation felt the agenda flowed in a way that felt supportive and respectful of their grief
- 93.8% 'Strongly agreed' that they felt emotionally safe and supported during the gathering, while 6.3% 'agreed' that they were emotionally safe and supported
- 93.8% 'strongly agreed' that the ground rules and intention set helped create a safe space, while 6.3% 'agreed'
- 81.3% 'strongly agreed' that they were comfortable expressing their emotions, which may include silence, tears, or strong feelings. 12.5% 'agreed', and 6.3% 'strongly disagreed'
- 100% of those who completed the evaluation strongly agreed that the libations ritual felt meaningful to them

- 93.8% ‘strongly agreed’ that they felt emotionally safe and supported during the gathering, while 6.3% ‘agreed’ that they were emotionally safe and supported

- 93.8% ‘strongly agreed’ that the ground rules and intention set helped create a safe space, while 6.3% ‘agreed’

- 81.3% ‘strongly agreed’ that they were comfortable expressing their emotions, which may include silence, tears, or strong feelings. 12.5% ‘agreed’, and 6.3% ‘strongly disagreed’

- 100% of those who completed the evaluation ‘strongly agreed’ that the libations ritual felt meaningful to them

- 81.3% ‘strongly agreed’ that the group conversations allowed me to share and feel heard, with 18.8% ‘agreed’

- 75% ‘strongly agreed’ that the discussions about culture and grief felt relevant to their experience, while 25% ‘agreed’

- 100% ‘strongly agreed’ that they gained insight or understanding about my own grief or others’ grief.

- In the Lunch & Small Group Sharing sessions, when paired in group discussions, 87.5% ‘strongly agreed’ that they felt strongly supported, while 12.5% ‘agreed’ that they were supported.

- 93.8% ‘strongly agreed’ that they felt comfortable sharing in the smaller group setting, while 6.3% ‘agreed’ that they felt somewhat comfortable

- 75% ‘strongly agreed’ that the altar, candle, and prayer activity helped them reflect on or release something meaningful, while 25% ‘agreed’

- 100% ‘strongly agreed’ that the closing circle of prayer felt grounding, and that they felt more supported through their journey through grief

- 62.5% ‘strongly agreed’ that the community altar activity helped me honor my loved one, while 31.3% ‘agreed’, and 6.3% felt ‘neutral’ about the community altar activity

- Five (5) out of the 17 women shared that there wasn’t anything that felt difficult or overwhelming, or that could be improved, with The Gathering, with one person sharing that she would like to have more of these sacred gatherings on a regular cadence

“What part of the day was ‘most meaningful’ to you?”:

- “To hear the stories of others. We have all walked similar paths.”

- “The introduction to speak about my grief, and the lunch group answers the questions.”

- “Hearing other people sharing their grief and the Counselors listening and helping us process each stage.”

- “The open space for sharing. Sisters had a chance to release and move forward to healing. We acknowledge that this is a process and there is no time limit for grieving. Every situation is unique.”

- “Everything today was great, but sitting with the smaller group during lunch was meaningful.”

- “The sharing of other people's grief showed me that I am not alone in my grief, and when you speak and share, it becomes easier and lighter to handle. I also got a better understanding of the timeline that it will take before it’s fully released.”

- “I saw a little of myself in everyone’s story.”

- “The closing circle.”

- “The storytelling of all the women who shared. Everyone was caring, respectful, loving, and supportive. I loved the breakout; it was very intimate. The sacred libation blew me away. Ayana was amazing in her role as the host. Rev Carla, I cannot get enough of my sister. She was so open and honest. The love she has for God's people does not go unnoticed—from the women on the team to the women who served us. Everything was so intentional. The gift bag, thank you!!”

- “I loved the entire experience, but the circle gave me hope and understanding that I am not alone.”

- “The libation ritual set the atmosphere.”

- “The entire day was meaningful, each activity filling my cup up a little more.”

- “Putting my name in the water.”

“How can the church or community better support you in your grief?”:

- “Offer more programs like this at least 3-4 times a year.”

- “St. Paul is already doing a great job in supporting.”

- “Holding important events like this at least quarterly. For women who have lost their children by abortion and miscarriage, there can be a naming ceremony.”

- “Reaching out more to those who request prayer, support groups, and building our grief ministry.”

- “Continued Support groups like we just had.”

- “Hosting grief shares all year long.”

General comments on behalf of participants:

- “It didn't feel like we were under time constraints, which was nice because every voice was heard.”

- “The agenda connected with or covered every woman in the sacred room. I felt relieved.”

- “I came in, hid my grief, and left with tools on how to deal with it and feel better.”

- “As we are a village, every voice matters. Every Sister who was willing and able to speak did so.”

- “The love, support, and sisterhood opened the space to be a safe space to express and let go of the grief I was holding.”

- “Thinking about and connecting to our ancestors was emotional.”

- “Because now we know what the other feels, and now we can support one another.”

- “Being allowed to share my grief and hear about others was so liberating. Breaking up in groups with women I did not know allowed me to learn and connect with new women. Got great suggestions for supporting myself and others during the grieving process. The circle of prayer is connected on a new level. That’s the purpose of circles. In addition, the food was so delicious.”

- “I recognized grief that I held on to but never healed from or even started a process of healing.”

- I related to so many other sisters' grief.”

- I felt seen and heard. We were provided with information, allowed to share our stories, and given time to connect with others.”

- “Grief is ongoing, always needs space to heal.”

- “Well-organized program.”

- “Everything was excellent.”

- “The Altar was amazing. Thank you for allowing us to participate in placing a picture and a personal item of our loved ones.”

- "Suggestion: We listened to a lot of trauma stories of grief, and the energy was a lot. There may be a need to take a break in between, i.e., drink water, take a breath, or walk around, to give the energy a chance to move around.”

- “Maybe there can be someone who deals in energy work; that person could be in the room. Not sure if the sister who performed the libation is experienced in this. I like that time was given to everyone to express their grief and let the tears flow.”

- “Today was Amazing!!! I enjoyed every part.”

- “I want to say thank you because how I came in, I left feeling much better, I left feeling filled, I left feeling supported, but most of all, I left feeling loved. Thank you.”

- “I really enjoyed the forum. I got to release a lot of my emotions that have been bottled up.”

- “Keep on the path you are currently on.”

- “Thank you for everything. I am still basking in the moment of all that occurred.”

- “Just a heartfelt THANK YOU!”

- “I was truly blessed to be in such a sacred, supportive space. Thankful to God for Rev Carla and the work she is doing.”

Recommendations for future support:

- “Doing this quarterly.”

- “Women and Men together representing Beyond The Eulogy .”

- “It was my first experience, and I couldn't ask for anything more.”

- “A journaling session relating to what you are grieving. Writing is another form of healing.”

- “There was a comfort level with it being all women. Rev. Carla and her team made me feel like it was a safe space. I think the Blueprint from yesterday is perfect.”

- “A grief therapist or counselor.”

- “I know this is heavy work, and all could benefit from a stress release class.”

- “What a beautiful group of women I met, and the grief team was dynamic.”
- “Rev. Carla and her team are excellent, very attentive, loving, and caring.”

Comments regarding the altar experience:

- “It moved me with different emotions. Happy, scared, longing, but I never felt alone.”
- “Thank you for allowing me to grow and understand why it is ok to grieve.”
- “The experience was a safe space. You felt comfortable and supported by familiar faces and new faces.”
- “Today’s experience was amazing. I was in a safe space and supported.”
- “I came in prepared for anything but was a little unsure of how I would feel about my own grief.”
- “I really appreciate sharing and learning about similar experiences regarding grief.”
- “I had the chance to meet women who shared the same interests as me, and having a conversation was appreciated.”
- “Just thankful for Rev. Carla and the space to have these forums.”

Beyond the Eulogy: Survey Results

For this paper, a voluntary survey was created to explore how Black Women feel in 2026. It polled Black Women ages 18 to 60+ on their experiences of grief, faith, and the need for safe spaces. 77 women completed the survey with the following results:

Demographics & Nature of Loss

- Age: The majority of respondents are 60+ (59.2%), followed by the 45–59 age bracket (26.8%), 5.6% in the 30-44 age group, and 8.5% in the 18-29 age group.
- Relationships: Most participants lost a parent (63.4%), followed by a sibling (32.4%) or a grandparent (28.2%).

- Timeline: Grief is long-standing for many, with 60.6% reporting their loss occurred 5 or more years ago. However, 69% are currently in the Acceptance stage of the Kübler-Ross model.

The Experience After the Funeral

The data suggests a significant gap between the initial support received and the long-term reality of living with loss:

- Immediate Feelings: 42.3% felt expected to be “strong,” while 23.9% felt alone and another 23.9% felt supported.
- Support Fade-out: While 28.2% had people checked in for a year or more, nearly 20% said people "never really did" check in, and another 19.7% saw support vanish in less than a month.
- The "New Normal": Many respondents noted that after the eulogy, the "phone calls stopped," and they were left to navigate a permanent "void" and daily routines alone.

Barriers to Grieving

- Judgment & Clichés: When expressing grief, many were met with platitudes like “At least they’re at peace” (53.5%) or “God knows best” (46.5%).
- Internalization: 66.2% of respondents retreat into silence when they don't have a safe place to grieve. 59.2% choose to grieve alone, and 49.3% do so in private spaces like the car or shower.
- Impact of Suppressed Grief: When grief is not processed, it manifests as anxiety/depression (46.5%) or exhaustion (28.2%).

Faith and the Church's Role

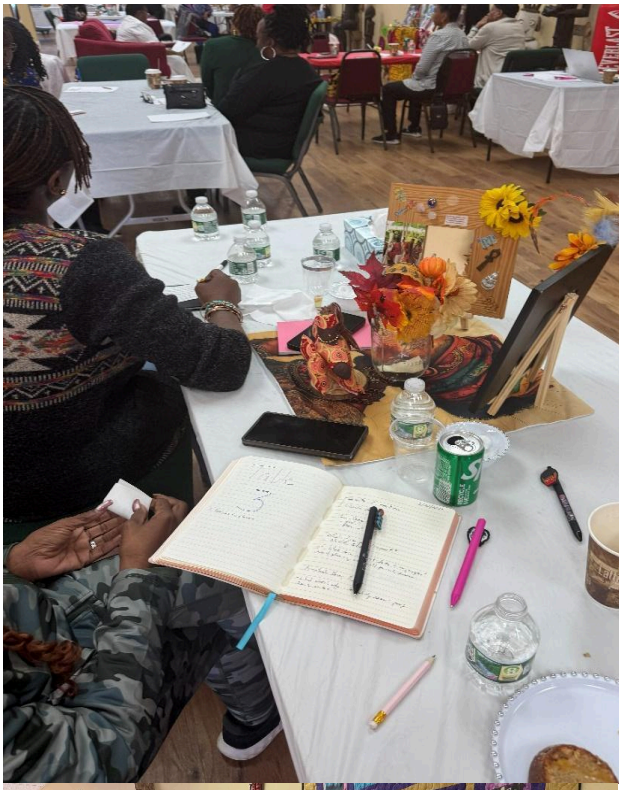
- Faith Connection: 87.3% have a religious practice (Christianity/Catholicism).
- Safe Spaces: While 59.2% find their faith community a safe place, others noted a lack of empathy, consistent check-ins, and a "culture of grief" that feels unified.
- Desired Support: Respondents expressed a strong desire for:
    1. Small sacred listening circles (71.8%)
    2. Silence without pressure to speak (47.9%)
    3. Rituals such as candle lighting or prayer (49.3%)

Key Takeaway: What is Unheard?

The most common sentiment shared by participants is that grief has no timeline. Many expressed frustrations with being labeled as "strong." They noted that they are often "numb" or "broken" underneath a composed exterior. They seek a space where they can cry without apology and be their authentic selves without being judged for how they grieve or for how long.

Beyond the Eulogy: The Gathering

Link to Video:




"I am no longer
accepting the things
I cannot change.
I am changing the things
I cannot accept."
- Angela Davis
Dear God
WILLIE MAE JOHNSON
"DEBBIE"

Conclusion

Grief is not the end of our story. It is the sacred soil wherein transformation takes root. For Black women, grief is never one-dimensional. It is layered with ancestral memory, cultural rituals, historical trauma, and enduring faith. It encompasses spiritual, emotional, physical, and political aspects. Through grief, we learn that healing is neither linear nor always quiet. Sometimes, it weeps through sleepless nights. Sometimes it roars through the streets, demanding justice. It whispers between sisters in the sacred hush of community, where we hold each other up and say: *You are not alone.*

In *Beyond the Eulogy,* I have shared my own story of the loss of burying my only daughter, LaKinda, and how that loss birthed a new layer of ministry in me. I have examined the shared experiences of Black women grieving across generations and locations. From biblical mothers like Rizpah and Job's Wife, to contemporary women like Hyacinth Watson.[113] A woman who mourned in public, seeking dignity and truth for her son. Through their stories, one truth remained constant: *healing begins when we are allowed to grieve aloud, in community, without shame.* Although this project centers on the experiences of Black women, it is important to acknowledge that Black men also carry profound grief. Cultural expectations surrounding masculinity often discourage men from expressing vulnerability. From a young age, many Black men are taught to "be strong," to suppress emotion, and to carry pain silently. These expectations can make traditional grief groups difficult spaces for men, particularly when those spaces require open emotional expression.

[113] Kara Fox and Christina Zdanowicz, "A Mother's Five-Month Search for the Truth about Her Son's Death in Colombia," (CNN, April 22, 2024), https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/22/world/hyacinth-watson-omar-colombia-intl-cnni.

In my experience facilitating GriefShare, men occasionally attend sessions, but often do not remain for the full thirteen-week journey. This pattern suggests that the structure or format of grief support may not always meet the needs of Black men. Rather than assuming what those needs might be, it is important to create opportunities to listen directly to Black men about how they experience grief; to ask them what kinds of spaces would allow them to process loss with honesty and dignity. Possible adaptations might include smaller discussion circles for men, mentorship models that pair grieving men with trusted elders, or activities that allow grief to be expressed through storytelling, service, or physical movement. These approaches recognize that grief is not expressed in only one way: healing may emerge through relationships, shared activity, and quiet companionship as much as through verbal expression. Even as we consider these possibilities, the focus of this work remains the often-unspoken grief of Black women. Their mourning has too often been hidden beneath expectations of strength, caregiving, and resilience, and it can no longer be ignored.

This reality raises a deeper theological question: *Does God grieve?*

This paper has traced the intersections of faith, culture, and therapy in the lives of grieving Black women. It has elevated the power of sisterhood not merely as emotional support, but as a sacred form of resistance. It challenges the church to make room not only for worship but also for weeping– for praise and pain. When women are denied space to grieve, they are denied space to heal. When grief is pushed into silence and isolation, the church risks distorting God's vision of restoration through community and relationship. Scripture suggests that God does, indeed, experience grief in response to human suffering and brokenness. In Genesis 6:6, we are told that,

“The Lord was grieved that he had made humankind on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” The prophets frequently portray God as lamenting the people's suffering and disobedience. In the New Testament, Jesus, God incarnate, stands at the tomb of Lazarus and weeps (John 11:35), revealing a divine compassion that does not remain distant from human sorrow. These passages suggest that grief is not a sign of spiritual weakness, but a reflection of divine love. If God grieves, grief itself becomes sacred. It is the natural response of a heart that has both loved and lost deeply. By understanding God as one who grieves, the church is able to reframe their response to those who mourn. Rather than rushing people toward closure or quick consolation, the church is called to accompany them in the slow, sacred work of lament. When communities create space for grief, they participate in the compassionate presence of God; a God who does not abandon humanity in suffering, but enters fully into it.

God is not confined to the hymns sung at funerals or the scriptures read at homegoing services. God is present in the quiet places where women weep into pillows. God is found in the community kitchen after the service, where sisters bring plates and prayers. God is found in the therapist’s office, in the prayer circle, and even in the midnight text that says, “I am thinking of you.” In these sacred gestures of care, we encounter Emmanuel, *God with us*, in every expression of grief; during every small step toward wholeness. Theologically, grief is not a punishment. It is a testament to love. Love, when held in divine hands, becomes the soil for something new to bloom. Our ancestors grieved in chains and still sang. Our mothers buried their children and still cooked meals. We carry grief, not because we are weak, but because we are deeply alive. As Black women, we do not grieve without purpose. Our sorrow becomes protest, our mourning becomes ministry, and our healing becomes a collective gospel.

What lies beyond the eulogy is a holy invitation not to forget, but to remember in a way that propels us toward healing. It is a call to create sacred spaces for listening and reflection. It is a reminder that our pain is not too much, our tears are not a burden, and our stories are not only worthy, but necessary. As we continue this journey, may we hold one another with grace. May we create spaces where grief is not hidden, but honored. May our churches, therapy rooms, and living rooms become sanctuaries where grief can be exhaled. And may we never forget that we serve a God who weeps with us, walks beside us, and resurrects what we thought was dead within and around us. Beyond the eulogy, there is life. There is sisterhood. There is healing. And there is God.

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