

A THEOLOGY OF PLACE:
FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY HUBS AND THEIR ROLE IN FOSTERING
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG BLACK YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

THEOLOGY OF PLACE: FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY HUBS AND THEIR ROLE IN FOSTERING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG BLACK YOUTH

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This research examines how Black churches function as faith-based community hubs and how these spaces contribute to leadership development among Black youth. Historically, the Black church has been more than a place of worship; it has been a space where individuals gathered, built relationships, and developed a sense of responsibility beyond themselves. As churches experience shifts in participation and institutional stability, questions arise about how leadership development is unfolding in the current context. This research uses a qualitative approach grounded in interviews with eleven individuals who grew up actively involved in Black church environments. Participants reflected on their experiences, including involvement in ministries, relationships with mentors, and opportunities to assume responsibility. Their responses were analyzed to identify patterns in how leadership developed over time. The findings indicate that leadership formation does not occur primarily through formal programs, but through consistent participation, relational engagement, and lived experience within the church community. Young people

developed leadership capacity by being present, by being entrusted with responsibility, and by being shaped within environments where expectations were clear and support was available. These experiences contributed to the development of confidence, identity, and purpose. Through a Theology of Place, the church is understood not simply as a physical structure, but as a formative space where relationships and shared experiences shape individuals. This research suggests that sustaining leadership development among Black youth requires intentional attention to cultivating spaces where participation, connection, and responsibility remain central. The ongoing challenge is not only to preserve the institution but also to ensure that it continues to function as a place of formation.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband Robert, our children ~ Ashley (Billie), Michael, and Joshua, Grandson Bille IV, and to all who have created spaces for Black youth to grow and develop as leaders. Your work matters.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Overview

Historically, Black churches have served as communal spaces where the community gathered and took shape. Within these spaces, people assembled not only for worship but also for civic engagement, youth ministries, and various church programs that shaped the community's social and spiritual life. In these settings, Black youth were often nurtured and developed into leaders through participation in congregational life.

Framed through a Theology of Place, I will explore how Black churches have served not only as sites of spiritual formation but also, both deliberately and unintentionally, as spaces in which community life has become a context for leadership development among Black youth. Changes in the institutional stability and physical presence of Black churches raise questions about how leadership development among Black youth is shaped within communities where these churches have historically functioned as formative spaces.

Personal and Ministry Context

My interest in leadership development among Black youth did not emerge in isolation. It developed through my personal experiences, vocational journey, and ministry context. For 20 years, I worked in county corrections, serving as an officer, sergeant, firearms instructor, and Internal Affairs investigator. During those years, I witnessed thousands of young African American men and women enter the prison system. While working in the Receiving and Discharging Department, one of the intake questions asked of every individual was, “What is the last grade you completed?” The answer I heard

most often was “eighth grade.” Hearing this response repeatedly forced me to confront a painful reality about the connection between education, opportunity, and incarceration in many Black communities.

Those experiences led me to reconsider the type of work I wanted to do in the world. I no longer wanted to remain in a system that primarily responded to brokenness after the fact. Instead, I felt called to work in spaces that could help prevent the cycles that lead many young people into the criminal justice system. That realization eventually led me into the field of education. My work in education strengthened my conviction that inequities within the educational system—particularly disciplinary disparities affecting students of color—often contribute to long-term social consequences for young people and their communities.

At the same time, my faith journey within the African Methodist Episcopal Church continued to shape my understanding of ministry and social responsibility. The mission of the AME Church has historically emphasized addressing both the spiritual and social conditions of people. The denomination’s commitment to “preaching the gospel, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, and encouraging economic advancement” reflects a long tradition of engaging with social issues affecting African American communities.

My ministry formation has been influenced by the recognition that faith communities have long functioned as centers of education, leadership formation, and social advocacy within Black communities. Historically, churches created spaces where individuals could cultivate social networks, share resources, and develop social capital that strengthened both individuals and communities. Through these networks,

congregations provided support, guidance, and opportunities that helped individuals improve their lives through education, employment, and civic engagement.

Within my own ministry context, I have come to understand that effective ministry requires engaging the different forms of capital present within a congregation and community. Drawing on the framework described by Rev. Dr. Sidney Williams, Jr., transformative ministry involves the shared commitment of the F.I.S.H. framework, faith capital, intellectual capital, social capital, and human capital. Faith capital provides the spiritual foundation and financial resources necessary for ministry. Intellectual capital emerges through the creativity and insight of congregants. Social capital develops through relationships and networks within and beyond the church. Human capital is strengthened as individuals pursue education, training, and opportunities for growth.

These insights have shaped my understanding of the church's role in the community. Churches have historically served as spaces where social networks form and where resources are mobilized to support individuals and families. When these networks extend beyond the congregation and connect with the broader community, they create what scholars describe as bridging social capital—relationships that provide access to resources, opportunities, and information beyond one's immediate social circle.

My research grows out of this intersection of personal experience, professional vocation, and ministry formation. Having witnessed the consequences of limited opportunities for many young people in the criminal justice system and now working in educational and faith-based contexts, I am compelled to explore how churches serve as formative spaces for leadership development among Black youth. I am interested in how

the physical and communal presence of faith institutions contributes to the cultivation of leadership, identity, and responsibility among young people.

This dissertation, therefore, emerges from both lived experience and theological reflection. It asks how faith-based community hubs—specifically Black churches—have historically served as places of leadership development, and how shifts in institutional stability and community presence may be altering that role for the current generation of Black youth.

This work is also shaped by my conviction that God forms people in place, through community, and through responsibility. My understanding of ministry has been shaped not only by what I have studied but also by what I have witnessed and experienced in spaces where people were given the opportunity to grow. These experiences continue to shape my understanding of calling, purpose, and the church's role in forming leaders.

Statement of the Problem

The Black church emerged in the United States through the experiences of enslaved Africans who sought spaces to worship, interpret the Christian message, and sustain hope amid oppression. Through religious experiences, Black slaves were equipped with a biblical understanding that called them to engage in acts of rebellion.¹ Groups of enslaved peoples created the Black Church in America as a means of survival and resistance against oppressive systems. These gatherings often occurred outside the supervision of slaveholders and became what Albert J. Raboteau describes as the

¹ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 48.

“invisible institution,” where enslaved people developed their own religious practices, communal relationships, and interpretations of scripture within the context of bondage.² The communal character of Black religious life reflects African traditions in which religion was intertwined with daily life, shaping communal identity and social relationships. According to Katie Cannon in *Katie’s Canon*, “Whether urban or rural, the Black church was the only institution totally controlled by Black people. It was the only place outside the home where Blacks could express themselves freely and take independent action. The church community was the heart, center, and basic organization of Black life.”³ As these traditions developed within the United States, the Black church became more than a place of worship. Within Black communities, churches functioned as spaces where reactions of the disinherited to oppression, such as fear, deception, and hate, could be transformed into faith, dignity, and leadership.⁴

Churches functioned as spaces where community life was organized, knowledge was shared, and leadership emerged through participation in congregational life. Institutions such as churches and schools frequently served as sites where African Americans cultivated education, collective advancement, and leadership within their communities.⁵

In many Black communities, congregations also served as networks of support, connecting individuals to resources and opportunities. Faith communities serve as social capital resources when relationships and networks connect individuals to opportunities

² Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212–213.

³ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 51.

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

⁵ V. P. Franklin, *Cultural Capital and Black Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2004), 37-39.

and community support. Participation in church life often provided young people with opportunities to develop confidence, responsibility, and public voice through worship services, ministry programs, and community initiatives.

The presence of Black churches within many communities has changed. Congregations that once served as stable gathering places do not always occupy the same physical or social role within neighborhoods today. Changes in the institutional stability and physical presence of Black churches raise questions about how leadership development among Black youth is shaped within communities where these churches have historically functioned as formative spaces.

The historical role of the Black church in shaping community life and leadership is well documented. Yet the impact of these institutional shifts on the formation of leadership among Black youth remains unclear. As Black churches experience shifts in stability, participation, and physical presence, an important question emerges: if these spaces have historically shaped leadership among Black youth, what happens when those spaces are no longer as present or accessible? This raises a deeper concern about where and how leadership development will continue for Black youth in communities where the church has long served as a central formative space.

Purpose of this Research

In this research, I aim to explore how Black churches served as faith-based community hubs in developing leadership among Black youth. Within Black communities, the Black church has been essential to leadership development. Youth had opportunities to develop leadership skills during worship services by participating in the liturgical process, praying aloud, reading scripture, singing in the choir, participating in

liturgical dance ministries, youth ministries, and taking part in Easter and Christmas plays. Through participation in church life, Black youth gained early leadership development experiences.

These faith-based community hubs served as spaces where leadership skills were developed both intentionally and unintentionally. Viewed through a Theology of Place, the physical church building functioned as more than a structure for worship; it served as a communal space where relationships formed, mentorship took place, and leadership developed. Over the years, however, declines in membership, revenue losses, and deferred maintenance of church buildings have limited many Black churches' ability to continue serving as community hubs that once supported leadership development among Black youth.

In this research, I will use qualitative interviews with individuals who grew up in the Black church to examine how their experiences contributed to leadership formation. Their responses will provide insight into how physical spaces within faith-based community hubs were used for leadership development and will help clarify the relationship among place, faith communities, and leadership development. These experiences prompt inquiries into the church's role as both a physical and communal environment in the development of leadership among Black youth. This research intends to explain this relationship by addressing the following research questions.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways did participation in church life contribute to leadership development among Black youth?

2. How does the physical space of the church function as a place where leadership formation occurs?
3. How do participants describe the church as a faith-based community hub within their community?
4. How have changes in the institutional stability and physical presence of Black churches affected opportunities for leadership development among Black youth?

Significance of the Research for Ministry

Black churches have long played a meaningful role in shaping and supporting the communities they serve. However, my own experiences growing up in the Black church complicate this narrative.

Going to church has been a consistent part of my life for as long as I can remember. I gave my life to Christ and was baptized when I was eight years old. We were at the church several times a week. My mother taught Sunday School, and we attended choir rehearsal. In addition, my mother would ensure we had weekly Bible study sessions at home. Even though the church played a significant role in my childhood, my family struggled with persistent poverty and moved several times before I reached the fifth grade.

My childhood church closed during my pre-teen years; the reasons remained unclear, though financial difficulties may have played a role. When the church closed, the loss was not only of a place for worship but also of a place where relationships and community had been formed. By my pre-teen years, the congregation itself had closed, underscoring the vulnerability of churches as physical and communal places.

Despite these challenges, my involvement in church, whether through the choir or participating in Easter and Christmas programs, continued to shape my growth and played a key role in who I have become today. Later in life, I became involved in church

leadership, serving in roles such as Christian Education Director, Dance Ministry, Choir, Class Leader, President of the Fellowship Committee, and Adult Sunday School teacher.

These experiences raise important questions about the role churches play in leadership development. Black churches have historically been understood as central institutions within African American communities, offering spiritual formation, leadership development, and social support. However, when churches lose physical space, financial stability, or institutional continuity, their capacity to serve as places for leadership formation can be diminished.

This research is significant for ministry because it examines how Black churches have functioned as communal hubs where leadership development among Black youth occurs and how changes in institutional stability and physical presence may be reshaping that role. This research also argues that leadership formation among Black youth is not primarily developed through formal programs, but through participation in place-based, relational environments within the Black church. When these formative spaces weaken, opportunities for leadership formation are disrupted, with consequences that extend into broader social systems such as education and incarceration. What emerges from this research is a clear pattern. Leadership development among Black youth in the Black church is not primarily the result of formal programs. It is a process of formation that takes place through participation in the life of the church. Within these spaces, young people are shaped through relationships, given responsibility, and formed over time. This dissertation argues that leadership development in this context is fundamentally participatory, relational, and grounded in place.

Overview of Chapters

This research is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study's context, the problem being addressed, the purpose of the research, and why it matters for ministry. Chapter Two engages relevant literature and theological scholarship on the Black church, leadership development, and the role of place within faith-based communities. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, including the qualitative approach, participant selection, and data collection process. Chapter Four presents the findings from the interviews and the analysis of participants' experiences. Chapter Five reflects on what these findings mean for ministry practice and considers how faith-based community hubs can continue to support leadership development.

CHAPTER TWO

African Religious Foundations

Although not all Black Churches' forms of liturgy and worship are identical, many of the Black Church's worship traditions can be traced back to African religion. According to Olupona, in *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, religion was intertwined into "all aspects of life" -in their daily affairs. Many Africans did not separate "religion" and "government." Even though there are several tribes with thousands of different languages on the continent of Africa, what is shared amongst the people is their belief in the human realm, gods, and ancestors, all of which interact with each other. Although different tribes had different beliefs about creation, there was a somewhat similar belief in some type of "explosion" or creative process. Different tribes had an array of narratives and rituals that made up their "cultural and national identity."⁶ This blending of religion, everyday life, rituals, and community identity is significant for a Theology of Place because it indicates that sacred meaning was always connected to location. People's beliefs were reflected in the places they gathered, the ways they worshiped, and the ways they understood the world around them.

As we further examine the historical development of African religion, we see a shift in indigenous religious practices. The expansion of Christianity in Africa began when European missionaries sought to spread the faith. As Christianity began to take root, young people were the driving force of expansion, serving as soldiers, migrants, travelers, or traders. As they encountered individuals of the Christian faith, they brought back what was taught to them and shared it with their families, which spread to other

⁶ Olupona, *African Religions*, 18.

families and villages.⁷ Due to missionary involvement in the 6th and 7th centuries, the religious practices of the indigenous people began to change.⁸

Enslaved Religious Practices and Sacred Worship Spaces

With the slave trade of Africans, religious practices continued. These spiritual practices embodied actions such as dancing, singing, and drumming, which traveled with enslaved Blacks along routes to Latin America, Jamaica, and the New World.

Religious traditions that transferred to the New World varied from society to society, and some have died out over time. The belief that Africans were stripped of their culture due to slavery or Afro-American culture arose. Even though a significant push was being made for enslaved Africans, in the name of Christianity, to save "their souls," Africans were not entitled to all the benefits of converting to Christianity. Although the enslaved could convert to Christianity, gather to hear the gospel being preached, and even preach the gospel themselves, the enslaved were forbidden to receive baptism for the reason that the sacrament of baptism equated freedom. The enslaved were eventually entitled to baptism; however, "freedom" for the enslaved didn't come from the ritual of baptism but from the ability to read the scriptures.

As more and more enslaved were introduced to Christianity, there was an increase in literacy. Individuals such as Frederick Douglass felt the joy of freeing the minds of the enslaved who had been kept in "mental darkness" and even began a Sabbath school, instructing the enslaved.⁹

⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.

⁸ Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁹ Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 105.

According to *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Those claims could be supported because points were made about: ¹⁰

- Missionaries not allowing the enslaved off on the Sabbath for religious instruction.
- Africans are too savage and incapable of learning, and on the basis of equality of Christian fellowship, “master-slave hierarchy.”
- The enslaved would become rebellious, ungovernable, and “saucy.”
- Southern colonies were finding it difficult for enslaved conversion due to the lack of clergy.
- A proposal for tax breaks was created for slave masters to convert the enslaved and baptize them.
- Religious instruction (schools) for the enslaved was incorporated.
- Slave holders were asked to send their enslaved 3x’s a week for Catechism.
- The Great Awakening had an impact on the conversion of the enslaved to Christianity.
- The enslaved were allowed to preach to each other until some states put laws in place.

Under the watchful eye of the master, religious services required the Black preacher to reinforce the enslaved being obedient to their masters. These worship services were more for the benefit of the slave master, as the preacher preached sermons in support of slavery. The enslaved were told in these sermons that they would make it to Heaven if they were "good," and still so, in Heaven, they are still not equal to their masters. Despite forced Christianity, Black churches began to form against the wishes of slaveholders in fear of promoting runaways. The enslaved created secret spaces and

¹⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 98-117.

places to gather to pray, sing, and listen to the preached word. Some of these spaces were known as "hush harbors," where the enslaved gathered in the woods, swamps, or wherever they could hide as a group and were intentional in not allowing their voices to be heard beyond their immediate circle. Despite threats of flogging and death, the enslaved "stole away" to secret spaces for worship. Worship services for the enslaved were a way for them to commune with God and pray for freedom from bondage. These hidden worship spaces were not sacred because they were formally recognized, but because enslaved Africans encountered God there. In *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Belden Lane argues that "particular locales come to be recognized as sacred because of the stories told about them."¹¹ Lane also argues that:

- The sacred place is not chosen; it chooses.
- The sacred space is ordinary space, ritually made extraordinary.
- Sacred space can be tread upon, without being entered
- The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.¹²

What this suggests is that spaces like hush harbors were not just places to hide, but places where enslaved people experienced the presence of God in real ways. Drawing on Lane's understanding of sacred space, these locations became sacred not because anyone officially named them that, but because of what happened there. They were shaped by prayer, memory, song, and shared experience. In that sense, the hush harbor may have been an ordinary space, but through what took place there, it became extraordinary.

¹¹ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 15.

¹² Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 19.

While enslaved people intentionally chose these locations for safety, Lane's framework helps us see that these spaces took on meaning beyond that choice. They became places of spiritual formation, resistance, and connection to God.

The songs enslaved African descendants sang in America were both theological and sociological. Songs such as "Steal Away Jesus" were a message to other enslaved in their community that there would be a worship service that evening. Songs such as "Swing Low, Swing Chariot" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" served as signals and guides to actual freedom from slavery. The theological and sociological aspects of these songs sung by the enslaved inferred liberation. Howard Thurman helps deepen this point by writing about "The meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall," offering not only spiritual comfort but a framework for survival and resistance.¹³ In the spirituals, religion was not an abstract doctrine. Meaning, just as God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, enslaved Africans and their descendants would receive freedom, either here on earth as slaves or in Heaven. Songs of the enslaved revealed the "social consciousness" of the enslaved's reality, condemning their environment. In seeking liberation, the enslaved sought freedom, judgment for their oppressors, and plans to secure their release. They believed freedom sometimes meant death and death equated resistance from human bondage. By participating in these worship services, enslaved Africans¹⁴

- Learned how to be deceptive to their oppressors- outsmarting them.

¹³ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 3.

¹⁴ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 46.

- Understood religion was a means of having an encounter with God. The spirituals are a form of history lessons, allowing the hearers to understand what the enslaved did to “hold themselves together and fight back.
- Trusted that God would act on their behalf. God delivers the weak from the injustices of the strong.
- With the death and resurrection of Jesus, the enslaved saw themselves in the story of Jesus and believed Jesus would save them.
- Struggle for righteousness and are not passive, they can experience God’s presence and turn their suffering into an “event of redemption.”

James Cone makes a similar claim, arguing that “Black theology arises from the struggle of an oppressed community to create meaning in life” and “The theme of liberation expressed in story form,” “is the essence of Black religion.”¹⁵ Building on James Cone’s scholarship, this struggle for liberation was not only theological but formative. Within these spaces, enslaved Africans were not only sustaining faith but developing identity, responsibility, and the capacity to lead within their communities.

When the enslaved identified with Jesus, that was a way of connecting with Jesus, associating with an oppressed group of people, and fighting for social change in that oppression. When Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”¹⁶ The enslaved saw themselves as the oppressed whom Jesus came to set free.

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 43, 60

¹⁶ Bible Gateway, “Luke 4:18 (NRSV),” accessed March 8, 2026,

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%204%3A18&version=NRSV>.

Emergence of the Black Church

The black church was born in slavery. Its existence symbolizes a people who were completely stripped of their African heritage as they were enslaved by the 'Christian' White Man.¹⁷

James Cone

James Cone raises the question why do we still carry the tradition of singing the Spirituals and the Blues?¹⁸ Cone's more general theological reasoning helps provide understanding. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he insists that theology cannot be separated from the community it represents. "To speak of black theology as survival theology refers to the condition of the community out of which black theology arises." The Black church emerged as a communal response to oppression, a "visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality."¹⁹ The Black church, then, did not just appear; it developed as a response to oppression, as a lived expression that the gospel is real in the midst of suffering.

Within that context, the Spirituals and the Blues are more than music. They are a form of resistance. Even while enslaved, there were parts of the self that could not be controlled. Singing became one of the ways that freedom was expressed. It was communal, intentional, and meaningful. We sang because we could, and in many ways, we still do. Engaging Cone helps us see that this tradition continues not just out of memory, but because it is rooted in survival, identity, and faith. These songs were formed in specific places and carried by the community, helping shape how people understood

¹⁷ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 65

¹⁸ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Kindle loc. 485.

¹⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 22, 23, 88.

themselves, their struggles, and their relationship with God. In that sense, they were not just expressions of faith; they were part of the process of formation.

Since Africans were stripped of their indigenous cultural practices upon arrival in the Americas, African Americans have framed the liturgy (the work of the people, communal labor, and labor for the Spirit) of the Black church as a way to embody their ancestral traditions. Moreover, singing is a way of remembering the struggles of African American ancestors, and, in remembering, African Americans strive not to repeat the past. In James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he states that "every significant black liberation movement has had its religious dimensions" beginning with the Civil War. "Christian freedom grounded in Jesus Christ" and civil freedom were interrelated, with Black preachers at the forefront in the struggle for the abolition of slavery.²⁰

An example of the Black church as the embodiment of the people, using the preached word, worship, and music to deal with oppression and fight social injustices is the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.C.). Born out of protest and the refusal to accept the whitewashed views of the Christian faith, the Black church is recognizable by the work of the people. The Black church is defined by how its congregants and leadership address issues of oppression and social injustice. This is why Cone can say that "participation in divine liberation places the church squarely in the context of the world. The church's existence is inseparable from worldly involvement."²¹

²⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 49

²¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 88

Black Churches as Community Institutions

“Heaven is free for all who worship in Spirit and truth.”²²

Bishop Richard Allen

Let's examine the A.M.E.C.'s purpose for its existence. It declares, "The purposes are to make available God's biblical principles, spread Christ's liberating gospel, and to provide continuing programs which will enhance the entire social development of all people."²³ Over the years, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has been attempting to live out this purpose. This communal vision is strengthened by the argument in *The Abundant Community* that care cannot be produced by institutions alone. Institutions can offer services, but care comes from communities where people take responsibility for one another, their children, their elders, and the vulnerable. This is part of what made Black churches more than worship centers. They became local sites of care, belonging, and social formation.²⁴

Its founder, Richard Allen, rejected the theological and social beliefs that Africans/African Americans were second-class citizens, citing in the early writings of *Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church*, “We will not receive any person into our society as a member who is a slaveholder.”²⁵ Thus, the African Methodist Episcopal

²² Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 81.

²³ African Methodist Episcopal Church, “*The Mission of the AME Church*,” accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.ame-church.com/>

²⁴ John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 4.

²⁵ Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, 192–93.

Church equips and inspires members to participate in advocacy of justice, human rights, the oppressed, and the voiceless.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.C.) has millions of members worldwide. Its membership spans across 39 countries on five continents. Over the years, the A.M.E. church has emphasized spiritual and social change. With the creation of The Christian Recorder, the oldest still-in-existence periodical published by African Americans, and the establishment of several institutions of higher education, the A.M.E. Church believes its communities need to be educated for community/social change. That emphasis on education and community responsibility also aligns with the claim that many young people struggle when they are raised without a culture of community in which they are needed. A competent community, according to *The Abundant Community*, focuses on its members' gifts, nurtures associational life, and offers hospitality. This language resonates with the historic role of Black churches in making youth visible, needed, and formed through participation.²⁶ In the words of Bishop Richard Allen,

We deemed it expedient to have a form of discipline, whereby we may guide our people in the fear of God, in the unity of the Spirit, and in the bonds of peace, and preserve us from that spiritual despotism which we have so recently experienced- remembering that we are not to lord it over God's heritage, as greedy dogs that can never have enough. but with long-suffering and bowels of compassion, to bear each other's burdens, and so fulfill the Law of Christ, praying that our mutual striving together for the promulgation of the Gospel may be crowned with abundant success.²⁷

Members of the A.M.E. Church, such as Rosa Parks and James Clyburn, strive to live out Richard Allen's words and have been instrumental in seeking justice for African Americans and promoting equity for all. Additionally, several Black preachers and

²⁶ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 67.

²⁷ Sernett, *African American Religious History*, 153.

congregants were leaders in the civil rights movement and paved the way, advocating for many social justice issues that people of color face today.

Theology of Place

A Theology of Place begins with the understanding that place is not simply a physical location. John Inge argues that any conception of place is inseparable from the relationships that are associated with it.²⁸ What this suggests is that place participates in formation. The spaces people inhabit carry meaning, memory, and the potential for encounter with God. This becomes clear in the call story of Samuel.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” 5 and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6 The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”²⁹

When we examine the call story of Samuel, we find Samuel living in the temple with the prophet Eli. We find Samuel in the place where he meets God. We find Samuel in the place where he is taught. We find Samuel under Eli's leadership. But how did Samuel

²⁸ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (London: Routledge, 2016), 26.

²⁹ Bible Gateway, “1 Samuel 3:1–10.”

arrive at this place? In 1 Samuel chapter one, we find Hannah, Samuel's mother, who was unable to conceive a child, worshipping before the Lord at Shiloh. Hannah was praying so earnestly that Eli, who was watching her from the doorpost, assumed she was drunk. Hannah exhibited what Katie Canon describes in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* when she states, "Black women were aware that their very lives depended upon their being able to decipher the various sounds in the larger world...to find meaning in the most despotic circumstances, and to create something where nothing existed before."³⁰ What this suggests is that Hannah was so despondent about her situation that she found herself praying to the God Who Hears, even when no words were audible. This challenges the assumption that it was Eli's blessing that opened Hannah's womb. It was from those unvoiced words that Samuel was birthed. And Samuel was dedicated back to the place where Hannah's religious experience created something from nothing. He was then returned to the very place where Hannah's experience transformed an ordinary setting into a sacred one.

Hannah's experience shows that an encounter with God is not limited to one place. It can happen in moments of desperation, in silence, and even when words cannot be spoken. Yet what follows in Samuel's life points to something just as important. While the encounter may begin anywhere, formation does not happen in isolation. Samuel is not only born out of Hannah's encounter with God; he is formed within a community, in a particular place, under the guidance of Eli. His life reflects a movement from encounter to formation, from personal experience to communal shaping. Thurman thus understood social regeneration to be shaped not only by social influences but

³⁰ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 54.

“predicated even more profoundly upon the individual's own encounter with ultimacy, God.”³¹ An encounter with God can occur anywhere; however, faith formation often happens within community. Wimberly makes this even more practical by arguing that people learn to live in healthy, whole ways by seeing those patterns modeled by trusted others, imitating them, and rehearsing them in their own lives. Faith communities support this process through their stories, role models, and mentoring relationships.

In African American communities of faith, mentoring has long fostered growth, self-actualization, and a sense of how to live responsibly in the world.³² This is especially significant for a Theology of Place because mentoring does not happen in abstraction. It happens in actual communities, through presence, attentiveness, and trusted relationships.

Wimberly names one of these mentoring practices as “phenomenological attending, a way of being available to the learner.” Through identification with what the mentor values, “the learner begins to value self, others, institutions, and moral responsibility.”³³ Samuel's call illustrates how sacred spaces function not only as places of worship but also as environments in which spiritual identity and leadership begin to take shape under the guidance of a faith community. Belden Lane's work helps name what is happening here. He argues that the place where we live tells us who we are, how we relate to others, to the world, and even to God. Samuel is formed in a particular place, under Eli's guidance, within a sacred community.³⁴ At the same time, Lane cautions that

³¹ Alton B. Pollard III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 8.

³² Edward P. Wimberly, *Relational Refugees: Alienation and Reincorporation in African American Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 23–25.

³³ Wimberly, *Relational Refugees*, 35–37.

³⁴ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

physical presence alone is never enough. Spiritual growth requires a conscious habit of being. This is important for this research because sacred space alone does not produce formation. Formation happens when people participate in the “life of that place in attentive and meaningful ways.”³⁵ Walter Brueggemann’s theological reflection on land further strengthens this point. In *The Land*, Brueggemann writes, “The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit.”³⁶ Place in biblical faith is never merely geographic. “A land is different when it is given in speaking and received in listening,” in which God’s presence is discerned.³⁷ Drawing on Walter Brueggemann, place is not only where people belong, but where identity is shaped and responsibility is formed. In this way, place becomes a condition for leadership development, as individuals learn who they are and how they are called to act within a community.

Educational Institutions and Leadership Development

“To ask what it means to learn anything is to ask the deeper question: What is the meaning of history?”³⁸

Charles R. Stinnett, Jr.

In the late eighteenth century, during the drafting of the United States Constitution, education in the new republic was largely local and informal. Schools were typically small, controlled by local communities, and often supported by religious institutions. Instruction frequently centered on reading the Bible, as literacy was viewed

³⁵ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 15–16.

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 45.

³⁸ Stinnette, *Learning in Theological Perspective*, 11.

as necessary for moral development and civic participation. In some communities, families hired tutors, while others sent their children to neighboring homes in exchange for labor and instruction. Even in these early arrangements, education was understood as an important means of shaping character and preparing individuals to participate in the life of the community.³⁹

Although schooling was often viewed as a family responsibility, early American leaders recognized the broader civic importance of education. Prior to the ratification of the Constitution, the Continental Congress emphasized the value of education in promoting “religion, morality, and knowledge,” which were considered necessary for both human happiness and good government.⁴⁰ As a result, education increasingly came to be understood as a public concern, even though schools remained largely controlled at the local level. What this suggests is that education has always been tied to shaping not just knowledge, but identity, responsibility, and participation in society. This becomes important for this research because it raises the question of where and how that kind of formation takes place for Black youth.

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, various thinkers proposed different models for educational reform. Political philosopher John Locke argued that children should receive instruction in reading, writing, drawing, history, and classical languages through tutors or carefully supervised home education. Thomas Paine proposed a system similar to what would later be recognized as school vouchers, suggesting that government funds could help parents send their children to school, with

³⁹ Paul E. Peterson, *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Douglas R. Egerton, *Rebels, Reformers, and Revolutionaries: Collected Essays and Second Thoughts* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

ministers certifying that proper instruction was being provided. Benjamin Rush advocated for a system of publicly accessible schools designed to cultivate an informed citizenry capable of participating in democratic life. Although these proposals differed in structure and scope, they shared a common belief that education was essential to the moral and civic development of society.⁴¹

One of the most influential figures in American educational reform was Horace Mann. Often referred to as the father of the common school movement, Mann believed that education could shape both the moral character and civic responsibility of young people.⁴² In 1837, he was appointed as the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, where he began advocating for significant changes to the educational system.⁴³ Mann supported the development of teacher training institutions, the establishment of common curricula, and the expansion of school libraries. He believed that education should cultivate disciplined minds and prepare individuals to participate responsibly in society.

Educational reform was not limited to the expansion of schooling for boys. Emma Willard played a significant role in expanding educational opportunities for women at a time when female education was largely restricted to subjects considered appropriate for domestic life.⁴⁴ With the establishment of the Troy Female Seminary in 1821, Willard introduced a curriculum that included mathematics, geography, history, and science.⁴⁵ Her work demonstrated that women were capable of rigorous intellectual study and

⁴¹ Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013).

⁴² Peterson, *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning*.

⁴³ Peterson, *Saving Schools*

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Anticaglia, *Twelve American Women* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980)

⁴⁵ Ruth Ashby and Deborah Gore Ohrn, *Herstory: Women Who Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

helped broaden access to educational opportunities for future generations of female students.

Similarly, Catharine Beecher contributed to the expansion of women's education by advocating for women's intellectual and moral development.⁴⁶ Through the establishment of the Hartford Female Seminary and her later work promoting teacher education, Beecher argued that educated women could influence both family life and broader society.⁴⁷ Her efforts helped elevate the status of teaching as a profession for women and reinforced the idea that education was critical to shaping social and moral life.

Another significant contributor to the development of American education was Noah Webster. Webster believed that education was central to the development of a unified national identity.⁴⁸ His work on spelling books and dictionaries sought to standardize American language and literacy.⁴⁹ By promoting a common language and instructional system, Webster contributed to the development of a shared cultural framework that supported the growth of national education systems. While these models expanded access to education, they did not always account for the lived realities of Black communities. This gap helps explain why other spaces, such as the Black church, became essential sites of learning, formation, and leadership development.

These educational developments show that institutions help shape moral imagination, civic identity, and social participation. Together, these reformers helped shape the development of educational institutions in the United States. Their work

⁴⁶ Barbara A. White, *The Beecher Sisters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴⁷ White, *The Beecher Sisters*

⁴⁸ John S. Morgan, *Noah Webster* (New York: Mason and Charter, 1975)

⁴⁹ Morgan, *Noah Webster*

reflects a broader belief that institutions such as schools play an important role in shaping moral values, civic identity, and social participation. This history shows that institutions play a significant role in shaping how individuals understand themselves and their place in society. However, when those institutions fall short, other spaces often emerge to fill that role. In Black communities, the church has often served as one such space.

Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Education

Basic Concepts of Engaged Pedagogy

- Analyzes systematic oppression as a way of teaching for social change, re-humanizing the dehumanized and faith maturity.
- Teaches to make sense of the yearning for, and absence of, community; problematizes individualism and strives for the embodiment of values closer akin to ubuntu, the beloved community, and the kin-dom of God.
- Creates a space for self-actualization through the insistence of “not losing your groove” in search of education; recognizes the humanity in groove and the groove in humanity.
- Disrupts the banking system and teaches that systemic hatred can be re-thought, re-structured, transformed and transgressed.
- Problematizes the dehumanizing and soul-splitting fear nurtured in the banking system and invites critical thinking and imaginative thinking as tools of freedom.
- Challenges and disrupts the myth of a politically neutral environment in classrooms.
- Challenges and disrupts the myth of individuality and objectivity and champions notions of community.
- Helps people make meaning out of agency and empowers both teacher and learner to take ownership of mutual learning.

- Encourages and empowers the voiceless to engage in conversation while at the same time asks the voiced to summon the courage to listen.
- Prioritizes the discovery of critical elements outside the realm of techniques imposed by traditional classroom settings, i.e. understands that relationships are key to education as a practice of freedom.⁵⁰

After engaging concepts of critical pedagogy and transformative education, I found myself wrestling with what it means to teach in a way that leads to change. Too often, education is treated as impersonal, as if what is taught and how it is taught do not shape how people see themselves or the world around them.

As I reflected on systems of injustice—racism, classism, inequity in education, and other forms of oppression—I was reminded that many of these realities persist not just because they exist, but because people have been conditioned not to question them. In many ways, we have heard words like oppression and liberation so often that we have become desensitized to them. The reality of oppression is still present, and the need for liberation remains.

Within this context, critical pedagogy pushes back against passivity. It challenges the idea that learning is simply receiving information. Instead, it calls for a kind of learning that requires response, engagement, and ultimately change. Charles Stinnette captures this well in arguing that “action is the primary context of knowing,” emphasizing that learning happens through engagement with the world, not separation from it.⁵¹ Learning, then, is not just about understanding something intellectually, but

⁵⁰ Nancy Lynne Westfield, “Basic Concepts of Engaged Pedagogy,” class lecture and collaboratively developed course material, *Introduction to Educational Ministries* (PSTH 503), Drew Theological Seminary, Spring 2019.

⁵¹ Stinnette, *Learning in Theological Perspective*, 30.

about being changed by it. As Stinnette notes, “to learn is to respond as well as to react. And to respond is to be changed.”⁵²

This way of understanding learning also exposes the limitations of traditional models of education. Paulo Freire critiques what he calls the “banking system” of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners.⁵³ In this model, students are not expected to think critically or question systems, but simply to accept what is given. In contrast, Freire argues that education should involve dialogue, reflection, and action. It should help individuals recognize systems of oppression and develop the capacity to respond to them.

Building on bell hooks’ description of education as a practice of freedom, one requires full participation from both teacher and learner.⁵⁴ This kind of learning requires honesty, engagement, and a willingness to grow on all sides. It also challenges the idea that education only happens in formal spaces like classrooms.

This is where the Black church becomes important in this research. Drawing on Paulo Freire and bell hooks, education is not simply about the transfer of knowledge but about making meaning from lived experience. When traditional educational spaces do not fully address students' socio-political and racial realities, churches have often become important spaces of formation. Within these spaces, individuals are not only taught but shaped through community, experience, and participation, developing a sense of identity, purpose, and leadership.

⁵² Stinnette, *Learning in Theological Perspective*, 36.

⁵³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 58.

⁵⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 21.

Anne Streaty Wimberly points out that Black worship itself functions as a form of Christian education, shaping identity, faith, and understanding of self.⁵⁵ The church has historically been a place where individuals not only learn about God, but also learn who they are in a world that often tells them otherwise. It becomes a space where meaning is made and where people begin to see themselves differently.

The framework of engaged pedagogy developed in this research builds on these ideas. It recognizes that teaching for social change requires more than information. It requires creating spaces that rehumanize those who have been dehumanized, that help individuals make sense of the violence they experience, and challenge the normalization of injustice. It also requires moving away from individualism and toward community—toward ways of being that reflect the values of the beloved community and the kin-dom of God.

At its core, this approach to education is about transformation. It is about helping individuals not only understand the world as it is, but also imagine what it could be—and then take steps toward that change. In this sense, education becomes more than learning. It becomes a practice of freedom, a process of formation, and a pathway toward both personal and collective liberation.

Institutional Shifts and Sustainability in Black Churches

Adaptive reuse is the transformation of an unused or underused building into one that serves a new purpose. The practice of adaptive reuse is rich and varied, and its importance extends not only to the reuse of existing structures but also to the reuse of

⁵⁵ Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Nurturing Faith and Hope: Black Worship as a Model for Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 63.

materials.⁵⁶ Churches, in particular, occupy a unique position within communities and are often viewed as trusted agents of social support capable of addressing spiritual, emotional, and material needs. In addition to providing spiritual guidance, churches frequently act as hubs for acquiring resources and organizing community outreach. This multifaceted role positions faith communities as important drivers of community support and development.

Historically, churches have relied on internal giving and congregational support to maintain buildings and sustain ministry programs.⁵⁷ However, changing economic conditions and shifts in congregational participation have made it increasingly difficult for some churches to maintain large facilities and continue traditional forms of ministry. The model of relying on the generosity of churchgoers is unsustainable because church giving and church attendance are declining.⁵⁸ As a result, many congregations are reconsidering how church properties can be used to both sustain the institution and address the needs of the surrounding community. In *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, Picardo asks the question, “What would it look like if local churches turned toward rebuilding, restoring, and renewing their communities rather than maintaining a ‘fortress’ mentality about preserving their institutional buildings and keepsakes, keeping the carpet clean, and trying to control the noise volume?”⁵⁹ Adaptive reuse strategies provide one way for faith communities to respond to these changing

⁵⁶ Mossop, E., & Polyzoides, S. (1996). *Adaptive Reuse: Extending the Lives of Buildings*. Princeton Architectural Press.

⁵⁷ Sidney S. Williams Jr., *Fishing Differently: Ministry Formation in the Marketplace* (Apopka, FL: Certa Publishing, 2018), 41-43.

⁵⁸ Rosario Picardo, *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fishes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 15.

⁵⁹ Picardo, *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, 15, 41.

realities while preserving their presence within the neighborhood. From a Theology of Place perspective, adaptive reuse is not only about preserving property. It is about preserving and reimagining the communal meaning attached to place.

Belden Lane's distinction between ordinary space and sacred space is helpful here. Story, memory, ritual, and meeting make space sacred. Using a church for ministry or community service does not make it less holy. It can help people express sacredness in new ways.⁶⁰

Church buildings have historically served as gathering spaces that provide more than spiritual formation. In many communities, churches have offered programs that support education, social services, and community engagement. Because of this role, church properties often function as anchors within neighborhoods where residents gather for support, guidance, and collective action. When these institutions face financial or demographic challenges, the stability of these community spaces can also be affected. In response, some congregations have begun exploring new ways to utilize their buildings so that they continue to serve the broader needs of the community.

In recent years, some congregations have explored partnerships with nonprofit organizations, community development corporations, and local stakeholders as a way to sustain both their ministry and their community presence. We should invite people to a new way of relating to their resources, as individuals who work in the marketplace are wiser than those who work in the church.⁶¹ This kind of partnership also reflects Brueggemann's claim that exile does not mean the absence of God's provision. "Exile is

⁶⁰ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 15–19.

⁶¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 18–19.

where Yahweh is with his people. But exile cannot contain him. He submits himself to the hopelessness of landlessness, but he is ruled by hope.”⁶² Even in landlessness and displacement, God remains with God’s people and sustains hope. For churches facing decline, adaptive reuse may be one way to refuse abandonment and to reimagine faithful presence in changed conditions.

These partnerships often allow churches to expand their role beyond traditional worship services and participate in broader efforts that address housing, food access, and community development. Through these collaborative efforts, churches can maintain their presence in neighborhoods while responding to changing social and economic conditions. In addition, Nouwen encourages faith-based institutions, “Asking people for money is giving them the opportunity to put their resources at the disposal of the kingdom.”⁶³

According to *Social Capital and Welfare Reform: Organizations, Congregations, and Communities*, faith-based communities thrive when members are actively involved in outreach and programs. These networks are further solidified when multiple family members engage, fostering strong bonds within the congregation.⁶⁴ However, the ability of faith communities to create lasting impact relies on their use of the four interconnected forms of capital: Faith Capital, Intellectual Capital, Social Capital, and Human Capital (F.I.S.H.).⁶⁵ These forms of capital are essential for leveraging adaptive reuse in religious properties to meet the evolving needs of the community. Integrating Faith, Intellectual,

⁶² Brueggemann, *The Land*, 118.

⁶³ Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, 18-19.

⁶⁴ Schneider, Jo Anne. *Social Capital and Welfare Reform: Organizations, Congregations, and Communities*. Columbia University Press, 2006, (264-265).

⁶⁵ Williams, *Fishing Differently*.

Social, and Human Capital enables faith communities to address both internal and external needs while sustaining meaningful community impact.

The first component of the F.I.S.H. concept is **Faith Capital**. Faith Capital encompasses the financial resources generated through tithes, offerings, and other contributions. These funds support the maintenance of church properties and enable the church to carry out its ministry. James Hudnut-Beumler writes in *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism*, “All church finance, Gray believed, ought to be underwritten by freewill offerings, paid by rich and poor alike according to their ability.”⁶⁶ Faith capital also reflects the spiritual motivation that drives congregations to act selflessly and innovatively in their outreach efforts. However, faith capital must be managed sustainably. Hudnut-Beumler’s work is useful here because it shows that questions of church finance are not new. The search for acceptable ways to finance churches has long been part of Protestant history, and stewardship eventually became the language by which many church leaders described both their aims and practices.⁶⁷

The second component of the F.I.S.H. concept is **Intellectual Capital**, which involves tapping into the creativity, expertise, and insights of congregants. Churches with members from diverse professional and educational backgrounds can benefit significantly from this form of capital. Intellectual capital empowers congregants to feel a sense of purpose and agency in the church’s mission. Open communication is essential for cultivating intellectual capital. Creating avenues for dialogue and feedback ensures

⁶⁶ Hudnut-Beumler, James. *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism*. The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle Edition, 49.

⁶⁷ Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar*, 47.

members feel heard and valued, fostering a collaborative environment where innovative ideas can flourish. Congregants bring diverse professional and creative expertise that can be harnessed to design adaptive reuse projects, ensuring that these initiatives reflect the collective wisdom and vision of the faith community.

The third component of the F.I.S.H. concept is **Social Capital**. Faith communities serve as invaluable resources of social capital, yet the effectiveness of this capital depends on its structure. Social capital can take two primary forms: closed and bridged. Closed social capital is confined within the congregation, with resources such as job referrals, financial assistance, and provisions for food or clothing limited to members. While valuable, this insular approach restricts the wider community's access to support. Bridging social capital, in contrast, extends these resources beyond the congregation, ensuring that both members and non-members benefit. This inclusive approach enables faith communities to address broader societal needs, fostering trust, collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose. For religious leaders, bridging social capital presents an opportunity to use social networks to bring resources into neighborhoods and create a ripple effect of positive change. Church members can offer their expertise in various capacities that will benefit the church.⁶⁸ However, leaders must recognize that more social capital does not always equate to better social capital. Factors such as accessibility, race, and residence play critical roles in determining the effectiveness and equity of these resources. When social capital is effectively bridged, it lays the groundwork for the development of human capital.

⁶⁸ Picardo, *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, 19.

The final component, **Human Capital**, refers to an individual's ability to improve their circumstances through education, skill-building, or training. For this to happen, individuals must have access to the resources and networks created through social capital. Without this foundational support, the pursuit of human capital may become unattainable. By forging relationships beyond their congregations, faith communities can amplify their social capital, expanding their assets and influence. This interconnectedness fosters opportunities for individuals to enhance their lives and contribute to the growth of their communities. Adaptive reuse projects can also create opportunities for workforce development, empowering individuals and fostering community growth. Charles Vogl's work on community reminds us that healthy communities need living rituals that can grow and adapt over time. That insight matters for adaptive reuse because churches often ask "whether we should hold to our tradition or should we release the past and adopt new symbols?" This forces discernment whether faithfulness means holding tightly to inherited symbols or allowing new practices to emerge that still carry the community's deepest values.⁶⁹

To create sustainable and effective social impact, faith communities must integrate the four forms of capital into their adaptive reuse strategies. Through this holistic approach, faith communities can repurpose their properties and missions to remain relevant and impactful. Mission drives ministry- "When people believe in the vision, they commit to the mission and become passionate about the work of ministry."⁷⁰By addressing both internal and external needs, these communities ensure that their

⁶⁹ Charles Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 66.

⁷⁰ Picardo, *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, 24.

legacy of service and spiritual guidance continues to thrive in an ever-changing world. Adaptive reuse, supported by the F.I.S.H. framework, enables religious properties to serve as centers of faith and social action while responding to community needs.

Leadership Development Among Black Youth

Historically, Black churches have served as communal spaces where the community gathered and took shape. Within these spaces, people assembled not only for worship but also for civic engagement, youth ministries, and church programs that shaped the social and spiritual life of the community. In these settings, Black youth were often nurtured and developed into leaders through participation in congregational life. This kind of formation matters because, as The Abundant Community argues, many young people struggle when they are raised without a culture of community where they are part of something and where they are needed. Black churches historically addressed that need by giving youth responsibility, visibility, and meaningful participation in the life of the community.⁷¹

Through involvement in ministries, programs, and worship services, young people gained opportunities to speak publicly, organize activities, and engage with the needs of their communities. These experiences contributed to the development of leadership skills while reinforcing the role of the church as an important environment for leadership development among Black youth. In *Relational Refuges*, Wimberly explains that, “African American faith communities have long practiced and supported mentoring relationships that foster individual growth and self-actualization.” Young people learn by observing trusted others, imitating their practices, and internalizing their values. In

⁷¹ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 67.

addition, “mentoring relationships in African American communities of faith facilitate the adoption of positive attitudes, scenes, narratives, and roles.” In African American faith communities, mentoring relationships have long helped youth develop identity, character, and a sense of how to live in the world.⁷² Seen through a Theology of Place, these churches weren't just places where young people happened to meet. They were places where sacred space, shared memory, and trustworthy connections came together to cultivate leadership.

These perspectives show that place isn't only a setting for ministry, but a part of how formation actually happens. From African religious life to hush harbors, from the emergence of the Black Church to present-day community hubs, faith has always been shaped in particular spaces where people gather, struggle, and make meaning together. These places carry memory, teach identity, and create opportunities for leadership to emerge. As churches face new realities and consider how their spaces are used, the question is not simply how to maintain buildings, but how to remain faithful to the role these spaces have always played. Understanding place in this way helps frame the ongoing work of faith-based community hubs as spaces where formation, belonging, and leadership among Black youth continue to take shape. Taken together, this literature points to a consistent pattern: formation does not happen in isolation, but within place, through relationships, and through participation. When these spaces are stable, leadership development is nurtured. When they weaken or disappear, formation is disrupted, and the effects begin to show up in other areas of life, including education and incarceration.

⁷² Wimberly, *Relational Refugees*, 23–25.

Gap in the Literature

While existing scholarship has explored the Black church as a site of spiritual formation, community life, and social engagement, less attention has been paid to how these spaces function as sites of leadership development among Black youth. There have been studies on Black theology emphasizing liberation and community, and on place, highlighting the importance of space in shaping human experience, but these conversations are often treated separately. Additionally, while there is growing discussion around adaptive reuse and the sustainability of church properties, there is limited exploration of how these shifts impact the role of leadership formation in these spaces. This research seeks to bring these areas into conversation by examining how faith-based community hubs continue to shape leadership development among Black youth through the lens of a Theology of Place.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

What emerges in this chapter connects to what I witnessed in corrections. Many of the challenges seen later in life trace back to earlier developmental gaps, especially when there are no consistent spaces to guide and shape young people.

“Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”¹ This research explores how Black churches, functioning as faith-based community hubs, contribute to leadership development among Black youth by examining how participants make sense of their experiences within these spaces.

Through the lens of Theology of Place, this research considers how physical church spaces shape leadership formation. To better understand these experiences, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who grew up in the Black church. This chapter outlines the research design, research setting, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the study's limitations.

Research Design

For this research, a qualitative approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of individuals who grew up in the Black church, where leadership development occurred. This research employs a phenomenological qualitative research design in order to understand how individuals interpret their experiences within the

¹ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 26-27

church as a faith-based community hub. The use of qualitative research for this study is appropriate as there is a belief that “knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon.”

² Semi-structured interviews allow participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words. The interviews allow the stories of Black church experience to be told through the lens of the individual and show how these experiences shaped their faith and leadership development. Since this research seeks to examine the relationship between faith-based community hubs and leadership development, qualitative research allows for participants’ meaning-making to emerge through their narratives.

Research Setting

The setting for this research is grounded in Black church environments that function as faith-based community hubs. These are not just houses of worship, but lived spaces where faith, identity, leadership, and community life intersect. Within these environments, the Black church operates as more than a religious institution; it serves as a center for spiritual formation, social support, cultural connection, and leadership development. It is within these spaces that individuals, particularly youth, begin to understand themselves in relation to God, community, and purpose.

Black churches have historically held a central role in the life of the community. They are places where people gather not only for worship but also for guidance, mentorship, and collective care. These spaces often host educational programs, outreach initiatives, and informal networks of support that extend beyond Sunday services. In this way, the church becomes a hub—one that responds to both spiritual and material needs. The everyday life

² Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 40

of the church, from choir rehearsals to community meetings, fosters an environment in which leadership is modeled, observed, and practiced across generations.

The physical church space itself plays a critical role in shaping these experiences. The sanctuary, fellowship hall, classrooms, and even the steps outside the building, as one interview participant recalls, all carry meaning. These are the places where relationships are formed, where stories are shared, and where individuals come to see themselves as part of something larger. For many participants in this research, their earliest experiences of leadership were not formal or structured, but emerged naturally within these spaces—through participation, observation, and mentorship.

This understanding of spaces connects directly to the framework of Theology of Place. As Belden Lane describes, a distinction can be made between *topos*—a physical location—and *chora*—a space that is alive with meaning, imagination, and presence. Black church environments often move beyond being mere locations.³ Through ritual, worship, and communal engagement, these spaces become sacred in a lived sense. They are transformed through participation.

For youth growing up in these environments, this transformation is especially significant. The church becomes a site where they are seen, affirmed, and challenged. It is where they are invited into roles, given responsibility, and surrounded by examples of leadership rooted in faith and service. As a result, leadership development is not something that happens outside of place, but within it—within specific spaces that carry meaning and are sustained by community.

³ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*

For this research, the Black church, as a faith-based community hub, is understood as both a physical and a relational setting. It is a place where space and practice come together to shape lived experience. By examining these environments, this research seeks to understand how leadership is formed not only through teaching but through being present in spaces where faith and community are actively lived out.

Participants

This research included 11 participants who identified as male or female and grew up in Black church environments. Each participant shared how leadership developed through their involvement in church life. These were not individuals observing from the outside, but people who were formed within these spaces through consistent participation and engagement.

Participants were selected from two age ranges, 25–35 and 36–45, to capture different perspectives across generations. This range made it possible to look at both more recent and earlier experiences of church involvement, while also showing how leadership development has remained consistent or shifted over time. The variation in age provided a broader view of how the Black church continues to function as a site of formation across different periods.

Each participant had a clear connection to church life during their formative years. Their involvement included participation in youth ministries and church-based activities such as liturgical dance, singing in the choir, ushering, Christmas and Easter programs, teaching Sunday School, and involvement in YPD. These experiences were not one-time events but ongoing involvement that contributed to their growth. Through these

roles, participants were exposed to responsibility, mentorship, and opportunities to lead both visibly and behind the scenes.

To protect the identity of all individuals involved in the research, pseudonyms were used in place of real names. Any identifying details were removed from the interview transcripts to maintain confidentiality and allow participants to speak openly about their experiences.

This research centers the voices of individuals who were formed within the life of the Black church, particularly those who were actively involved as youth and shaped through relationships with older mentors, ministry leaders, and congregational communities. Their experiences reflect the intergenerational nature of leadership formation and highlight the role of the church as a space where multiple generations contribute to the development of young people.

Data Collection

Data for this research were collected through semi-structured interviews. This format allowed for consistency across interviews while still giving participants space to share their experiences in their own words. I wasn't trying to restrict responses but to guide the conversation to stay focused on leadership development within Black church environments.

The interview protocol included approximately thirty questions organized around key themes such as church involvement, leadership experiences, mentorship, and the role of church space. While each participant was asked similar questions, the semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions and deeper conversation when needed. This approach made space for both shared experiences and individual differences.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted virtually using Zoom. The virtual format made scheduling more manageable while still allowing for meaningful conversation. All interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom with participants' consent to ensure accuracy.

The data collection process followed several steps. First, participants were contacted through a recruitment letter sent via email and text message. This letter explained the purpose of the study and invited individuals to participate. Second, those who agreed to participate were provided with a Calendly link, allowing them to choose an interview time that worked best for them. This made scheduling easier and allowed participants to select times that fit their availability.

Third, interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom. This format allowed for real-time conversation and created a comfortable space for participants to share their experiences. Fourth, each interview was recorded using Zoom's recording feature. These recordings made it possible to revisit the conversations and ensure nothing was missed. Finally, all recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed alongside the audio recordings to confirm accuracy. Both audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected files to maintain security. This process helped keep the data accurate and protected.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach. This method allowed patterns and shared experiences to emerge across participant responses without forcing the data into predetermined categories. The goal was to remain close to what participants shared while identifying connections across their experiences.

The analysis began with multiple readings of the interview transcripts. Repeated review helped deepen familiarity with each participant's narrative and allowed key ideas to surface more naturally. As transcripts were reviewed, recurring phrases, experiences, and points of emphasis were noted, particularly those related to church involvement, mentorship, leadership opportunities, and the role of church space.

From these repeated ideas, initial codes were developed directly from participant responses. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, which became the foundation for emerging themes. Through this process, several key themes were identified, including youth participation, mentorship, sacred space, and identity formation. These themes were not predetermined but developed through consistent patterns across participant narratives.

To ensure consistency, themes were reviewed multiple times and compared across participants. This process helped confirm that the themes reflected shared experiences rather than isolated responses. Attention was given not only to what participants said, but also how they described their experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of meaning. A more detailed discussion of these themes is presented in Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher with lived experience in both the Black church and correctional systems, I recognize that my perspective shapes how I interpret the data. To address this, I remained attentive to participants' voices and grounded my interpretations in direct responses rather than personal assumptions.

Several steps were taken to make sure this research was conducted ethically and with respect for all participants. Participation in the research was completely voluntary.

Participants were not compensated, and all signed consent forms before participating in the interviews. This made sure participants understood the purpose of the research and their role within it.

Confidentiality was a central concern throughout the research process. Participants' names and identifying information were removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. This allowed participants to speak openly without concern that their identities would be revealed.

All data collected, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored in password-protected files. Access to this information was limited to the researcher, helping ensure that participant information remained secure throughout the study.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this study. However, ethical practices were still followed to protect participants and maintain the integrity of the research process.

Limitations of the Study

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, comprising 11 participants. While the interviews provided meaningful insight, the findings may not apply to all Black church experiences. Additionally, the participant group included more females than males, and no participants identified as LGBTQIA+, which limited the range of perspectives represented. Second, the research focused primarily on specific church contexts. Most participants were affiliated with AME churches, with a few from Baptist and non-denominational backgrounds. Because of this, the findings may reflect experiences more specific to these traditions rather than the full range of Black church expressions.

Finally, the research relied on participant memory and personal narrative. While these reflections are important, they are shaped by time and individual perspective. Participants' recollections may not capture every detail of their experiences, but they still provide meaningful insight into how leadership formation was experienced and understood.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals who grew up in Black church contexts. These findings should be understood in light of a broader claim guiding this research: when Black churches function as stable, relational spaces, they support leadership development among youth. When those spaces are weakened or no longer present, the opportunities for that kind of formation are reduced.

The purpose of this research was to explore how Black churches, especially when functioning as faith-based community hubs, contribute to leadership development among Black youth. Instead of focusing only on formal leadership roles, this research looks at how leadership develops through everyday involvement in church life.

The findings are based on the lived experiences shared by the participants. Each person spoke about how their time in church shaped not only their faith but also their understanding of responsibility, community, and leadership. These experiences were not limited to a single moment but developed over time through participation in various areas of church life.

As I reviewed the interviews, several patterns began to show up across participants. These patterns point to how church spaces played a role in shaping leadership development. In many cases, leadership was not formally taught but learned through being present, involved, and guided by others in the church.

This chapter presents these themes through the voices of participants to show how leadership was experienced within Black church environments. Together, these findings help show how the Black church continues to serve as a place where leadership is formed through community, practice, and lived experience. While these findings highlight patterns across participant experiences, they also point to something deeper. Leadership formation did not occur in isolation, but within specific environments shaped by relationships, expectations, and meaning. This becomes important when viewed through a Theology of Place, where the church is not simply a location but a space that actively shapes how individuals are formed over time.

Participant Overview

There were eleven individuals who participated in this study. Participants fell within two age ranges, 25–35 and 36–45, which allowed for perspectives from both early adulthood and midlife. This made it possible to examine how leadership development was experienced at different points in life, while also noting which experiences were shared across both groups.

All participants reported growing up in Black church settings where they were actively involved in church life. Their involvement included youth ministries, church programs, and different forms of leadership during worship services and throughout the week. For most of them, church was not something they attended occasionally, but something they were consistently a part of.

Participants also came from different geographic regions, including the North, the East Coast, and the Deep South. While there were some regional differences, many of their experiences were similar, especially in how the church functioned in their lives.

Across the group, church involvement played an important role in their development. Whether through formal roles or simply being present and participating, each person described the church as a place where they were supported, guided, and given opportunities to grow.

Participant	Age Range	Gender	City/State	Denomination Raise	Youth Church Involvement
A	36-45	Female	Lithonia, GA	Church of God in Christ	Youth Sunday School Teacher
B	26-35	Female	Trenton, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	Choir
C	36-45	Male	Trenton, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	YPD President, Jr. Steward
D	36-45	Male	New Orleans, LA	Church of God in Christ	Drummer, Choir
E	36-45	Female	Cherry Hill, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	Dance, YPD
F	36-45	Male	Ft. Lauderdale, FL/New Orleans, LA	Baptist	Sunday School Teacher
G	36-45	Male	Queens, NY	African Methodist Episcopal	Jr. Trustee, Dance
H	26-35	Female	Terrell, Texas	Non-Denominational	Choir, Teaching
I	36-45	Female	Trenton, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	Choir, Usher, YPD
J	36-45	Female	Trenton, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	YPD President
K	36-45	Female	Trenton, NJ	African Methodist Episcopal	Secretary for Youth Sunday School, Dance, Choir

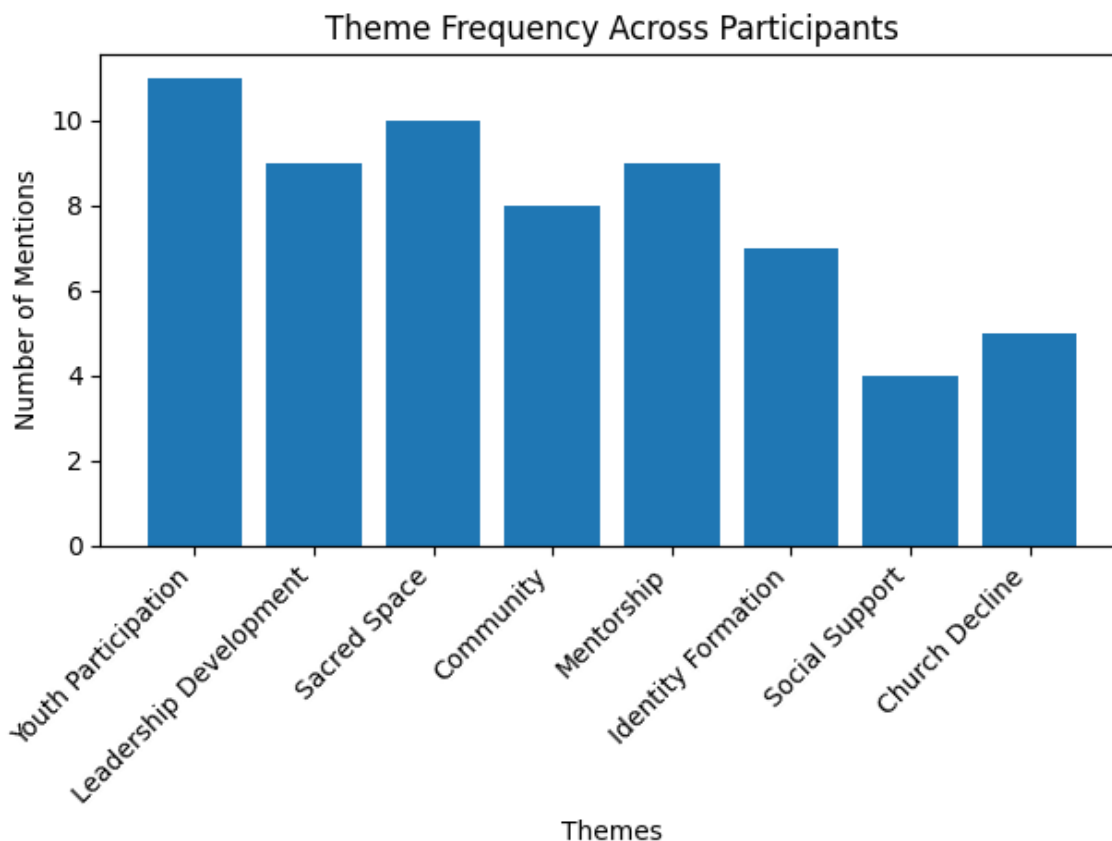
Findings Organized by Themes

After conducting the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts several times, analyzing the recurring themes guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways did participation in church life contribute to leadership development among Black youth?
2. How does the physical space of the church function as a place where leadership development occurs?
3. How do participants describe the church as a faith-based community hub within their community?
4. How have changes in the institutional stability and physical presence of Black churches affected opportunities for leadership development among Black youth?

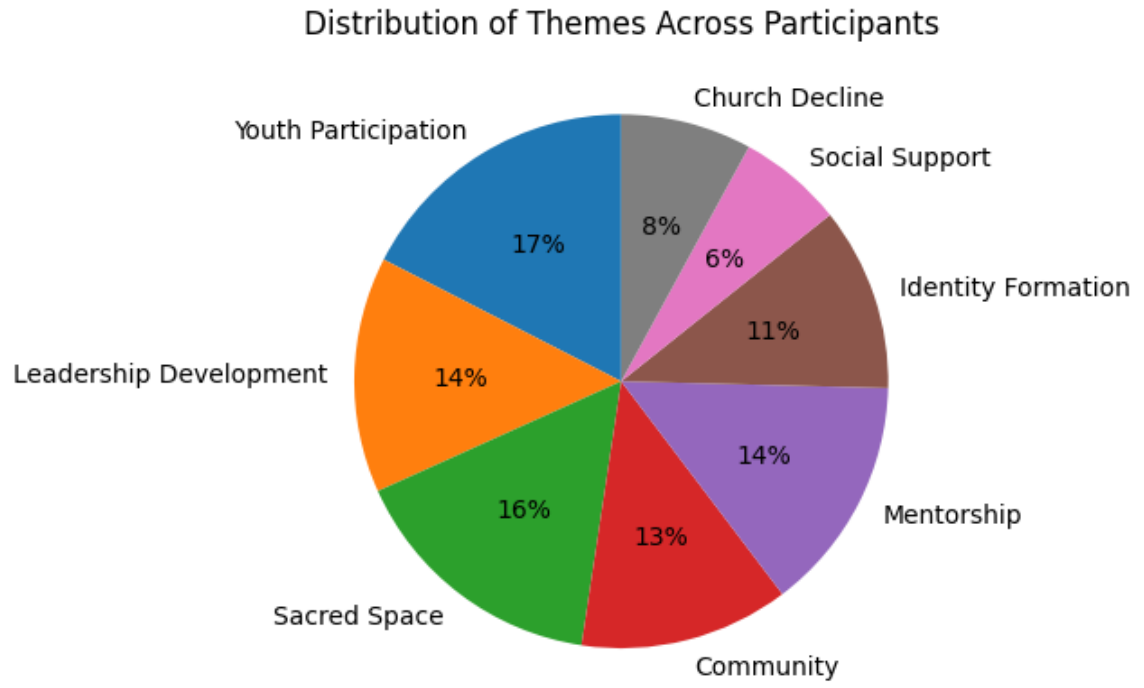
The scores ranking themes

- Youth Participation — 11
- Sacred Space — 10
- Leadership Development — 9
- Mentorship — 9
- Community — 8
- Identity Formation — 7
- Church Decline — 5
- Social Support — 4



The graph shows how the coded themes are distributed across participants' answers. The interview results showed that youth participation and sacred space were the most frequently discussed topics, highlighting their importance to participants' church experiences. Church decline and social support were less common.

This pattern indicates that participants most strongly associated their development with active involvement and with the church's physical and relational environment. Leadership development appears to have been rooted less in formal support systems and more in consistent participation within spaces that carried meaning, responsibility, and community.



The pie chart shows how the coded topics were distributed across the participants' interviews. The most common coded references were about youth participation and sacred space. The least common were about church decline and social support. This distribution further highlights that participants primarily connected their development to active involvement and meaningful engagement within the church, rather than to institutional challenges or formal support structures.

Early Leadership Development Through Youth Participation in Church Life

Several participants talked about stepping into leadership roles at an early age within their churches, such as helping to lead worship, serving in various ministries, and speaking at church events. These experiences gave them opportunities to be active in church life and begin developing leadership early on. Their responses below show how early leadership formation was developed through participation in church life.

Participant A: “I had mentorship because my actual pastor saw... I think she saw something in me. And I still give her her flowers to this day, because it instilled so much. I didn't know I was gonna get that. And I know that it was instilled in me, and all the other youth that were there and present, we still talk about it. We still talk about remember, like, I learned how to fast at 16 years old because my pastor thought, like, you're not too young to fast. And she taught us how to fast, and she kept us, like, encouraged. Reading the Bible.”

Participant B: “I think they intentionally mentored us because it was it was family, literally. They were making sure that they were raising us in a way to ensure we were staying on track of being successful youth, but also walking in the light of God and making sure that we are learning and becoming leaders in the church, because without leaders in the church, we, the church is gonna crumble.”

Participant D: “There was an elder in a church that called me his son and he knew I didn't have a dad in a home, and so his mentorship, he took me under his wing, brought me places where he had to go preach, he brought me with him, took me out to eat. All of those things, and he was a dad to me. Still is. I still look at him, and, the way he treated his wife, and his family. He was a family man, and so, it was an honor for me, because I chose him as my person to pattern after, and he embraced me as that, so it was a large. I can't even express the impact that he had on me. I wanted to be him.”

Participant F: “My pastor at the time, I think he played a major role in my life. My daddy was absent a lot from my life, and so, when I decided to get re-baptized at 13 years old, he actually brought me in his office. And actually sat me down and taught me what it meant to be baptized, what it meant to accept Jesus and what it meant to actually try to be a man growing up in this society, and so I think it played a major role and who I am on today, and how I view myself, and how I see myself, my closeness with God.”

Participant G: “Adults were very intentional. Overall, they were very intentional about mentorship. We even had mentorship programs within the church that I grew up in. They had something for the young men, and then they had something for the young women. So they were very intentional about mentorship.”

Participant H: “I was intentionally mentored. By the grace of God, yeah, even into my college years. I would say there were some leaders who, if they saw really any of us, but

people who are missing or more consistent, they would take them. Take us under their wing. I was very much intentionally mentored growing up.”

Participant I: “If you got a little out of control, they would check you. They would politely, and sometimes very rudely, correct you, and I appreciate that, because I had a village.”

Participant J: “I don't enjoy public speaking as an adult, and I feel being in spaces outside of the church made me more, self-conscious about it, but, being able to stand up and talk in front of a church was definitely something that I got there just from the ways that we were involved with being on the program during Youth Sunday, or your basic doing Easter speeches, or whatever speeches. Even learning that I could choreograph a dance. And getting the space to grow as a dancer... church was kind of my training ground or my classroom for being able to cultivate that skill. Same thing with singing, which was something for a long time that I was afraid of, and it's now something that I do.”

What emerges across participants is that leadership started early. Youth were not just sitting in the pews; they were involved, doing things, and being placed in positions where they had to speak and serve. Pastors and leaders were intentional about pulling them in and expecting something from them. In many cases, that mentorship filled gaps outside of the church. They were being shown how to live, how to carry themselves, and how to lead.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that leadership was not something participants had to wait to grow into later in life. It was already happening through what they were asked to do. Participation created responsibility, and over time, that responsibility built confidence. Leadership was not taught as a formal lesson but was learned by being present, active, and trusted with something.

These experiences point to something deeper about how leadership development happens in the Black church. It is not primarily program-driven, but presence-driven. Being in the space, being seen, and being expected to contribute created opportunities for growth. In this way, leadership formation was not separate from the environment. It was shaped within it, through relationships with people who were willing to invest in you over time.

Intergenerational Mentorship as a Method of Leadership Development

Participants consistently described the church as a place where mentorship happened across generations. Guidance came from pastors, elders, church mothers, and other members who actively shaped them. This mentorship showed up in both formal and informal ways and played a key role in their development of confidence, responsibility, and leadership. Their responses below show how mentorship served as a method of leadership development.

Participant A: “I was a Sunday school teacher for the teenagers.”

Participant C: “I know how to conduct a business meeting or a meeting in a secular setting because of what I learned from our church experience. I feel confident in these meetings because in church I was taught. that I was somebody.”

Participant E: “Also, being asked to be in the Easter program, or some of those things, being in the YPD.”

Participant F: “My pastor gave us an opportunity for the youth to lead on fourth Sundays; he gave us the opportunity to actually get up there and actually go over what you learned. And so I didn't necessarily have a title, but I was very active.”

Participant G: “So, we had a youth church, we had service. Sunday service, and so, I was a junior officer. I was also Junior Trustee. I was also an ambassador. So, yeah, I was very much active, on top of dancing.”

Participant I: “I was an usher. I was in the choir. I was the choir director, and I was the choir's president. We had to do our testimonies, share our testimonies with the entire church, so that was public speaking. We had to do the what is it, the call to worship. We had to do the service. They made us feel wanted and needed. It wasn't just, oh, those are just the teenagers, those are just the kids. No, we had a responsibility. And I didn't... I might not have appreciated then, but I appreciate it now, because now, I can stand in rooms with people who I don't feel and necessarily belong in a room. But I'm not going to

be in a corner somewhere, scared. I know that my voice has power, and I know how to use it.”

Participant K: “I feel as though... the confidence to...speak publicly in front of people, and not just a small crowd, but a larger crowd came from being in church, starting from when we were put up in the pulpit for youth Sundays, and, you can barely reach the podium with the mic, but you're reading the scripture and doing the decalogue, or you have to go to the altar and kneel.”

What emerges across participants is that mentorship gave them confidence. In spaces outside of the church where they may have felt voiceless, they found their voice through relationships with people who took the time to invest in them. Adults guided and mentored youth in both formal and informal ways. This included pastors, church mothers, elders, and other members who consistently poured into them. Through those relationships, they learned responsibility—what it meant to show up, to be accountable, and how to carry themselves.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that mentorship was not just about instruction, but about example. Participants were not only told how to lead, they were shown through everyday interactions with people who modeled discipline, faith, and consistency. These relationships created accountability, but also a sense of belonging. Being known within the church reinforced the idea that their presence mattered.

These experiences point to the relational nature of leadership development in the Black church. For many participants, mentorship filled gaps that existed outside of the

church. It provided guidance, support, and structure that was not always available elsewhere. As a result, leadership formation and personal development were happening at the same time. Leadership was not formed in isolation, but through connection, correction, and consistent support over time.

The Black Church as a Faith-Based Community Hub

Several participants described the church as a hub for community gatherings and a place where young people felt a sense of belonging and built relationships. It wasn't just about being there on Sundays but being involved throughout the week and around people who knew them and poured into them. The church created space for community, and it shaped how they experienced both the church and themselves. Their responses below show how the Black Church served as a Faith-Based Community Hub.

Participant A: “So I've been a part of several different churches, and so the first church that I talked about growing up in, that church really kind of put a sense of community because we had children's church. So we were catered to.”

Participant B: “I was surrounded by so many strong Black women and Hispanic women.”

Participant D: “If that church was lost, it'd be a devastation, honestly, to the community.”

Participant E: “I grew up in a predominantly white, and not just white, overtly racist kind of spaces, and so for me, church felt home. Because church was a space where I was actually with my community. I felt during the week at school, I was the outsider, or whatever, but when I went to church, there were other people that looked me.”

Participant H: “Being a part of a Black church, that was where my comfort zone was. Honestly, growing up in places such as Mississippi, Illinois, and Texas, there's racism everywhere, but especially in the South. So, having a place to call home and just be, seeing other, Black men and women of faith was encouraging.”

Participant K: “I feel this is gonna sound weird, saying. But it feels like home. It feels, even now, when I go in, and I know it's not the thing, it feels like going home, because it just felt when you walked in, you felt automatically, the love.”

Participant J: “If you came more than one Sunday, guess what? Tag you it, so... All you had to do was have a face and a place, and you were gonna have a space.”

What emerges across participants is that the Black church felt like community. It felt like home. It was a place where people were cared for and where needs were met—emotionally, spiritually, and overall. They were surrounded by people who looked like them and understood them, and that mattered. They were not just attending church; they were part of something. They felt seen, and that sense of community shaped how they experienced the church as more than just a place, but as a hub.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that belonging played a major role in leadership development. Participants did not describe the church as somewhere they visited, but as a space they were connected to. That sense of belonging created an environment where they felt safe to grow, take risks, and develop their identity. When people feel like they belong, they are more willing to step forward, participate, and take on responsibility.

These experiences point to the connection between community and leadership. Leadership formation was not separate from relationships; it was shaped by them. The church functioned as a space where relationships were central, and those relationships helped individuals understand who they were and how they showed up—not just in the church, but in the world around them.

The Church Environment as a Sacred Space and a Place of Spiritual Meaning

Several participants described the church as a sacred space and a place where meaning-making occurred. It wasn't just the building itself, but what was experienced within it. The physical space held emotion. Their responses below show how the church environment was both sacred and a place where spiritual meaning was formed.

Participant A: “It felt sacred, it felt holy to me.” “It ultimately deepened my faith.”

Participant B: “Oh, it felt sacred”

Participant C: “This is the place where I saw my grandmother for the last time. This is the place where I was baptized at the same altar. This is the place where, when I've had

hard times, I kneel down at the altar. This is where I was taught the importance of communion and how sacred it is. This is. where I was taught, just how to honor the things of God, the pulpit, and just be respectful. So it's very sacred to me. The building itself is very sacred.”

Participant G: “And so, when I think about the physical church building, I automatically think about the sanctuary, thinking about how sacred the space is. For us to lament. A space for us to cry, it's a space for us to vocalize. To be vocal about our feelings, ask questions, ask God questions. So I see the church as sacred. It's a sacred space. I think it made me feel sacred. The fact that people allowed it to be sacred.”

Participant I: “It’s sacred and empowering. It's a sense of peace. When I go into the building. not because of the family history, but I just feel that, that's a place, the altar specifically, that altar, you can just take anything. Even things that you might not verbally say to someone else. Certain things that you just want God to hear. And, I get it, God is everywhere, but there's something about the sanctity of being at the altar, and just being able to talk and filter and discuss things with God when you feel you have no other place to go.”

Participant K: “I think about a warmth, a love, a joy. and excitement and enthusiasm. I think about the Holy Spirit just filling the building up.”

What emerges across participants is that the church environment was experienced as sacred. It was not just the building itself, but what happened within it that gave it meaning. From the altar to the pulpit, from the stained-glass windows to the steps, the space carried weight. It was a place where people felt something. It shaped how they saw themselves, their faith, and their purpose.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the church was more than a physical structure. The meaning attached to the space influenced how participants experienced God and made sense of their lives. The altar, the sanctuary, and other areas within the church were not just locations, but places where individuals encountered God, reflected, and worked through what they were carrying.

These experiences point to what a Theology of Place helps to name. The environment itself played a role in formation. The church became a space where spiritual, emotional, and leadership formation came together. Leadership did not just happen in the church. It was shaped by the church as a meaningful and sacred space. The memories, expectations, and experiences connected to that space helped form how participants understood themselves and how they grew over time.

Chapter Summary

The findings in this chapter show how leadership development took place through everyday involvement in church life. Across participants, several themes came up that point to how the Black church functioned as a space for growth, responsibility, and formation. Leadership began early through youth participation, in which participants were given opportunities to speak, serve, and take on roles within the church.

Mentorship also played a key role. Participants described being guided by pastors, elders, church mothers, and other members who poured into them over time. Through those relationships, they developed confidence, learned responsibility, and began to understand their voice and identity.

The church was also described as a community hub. It was a place where participants felt like they belonged, where relationships were built, and where they were supported emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Many described the church as a place that felt like home and where they were seen and understood.

In addition, participants described the church environment itself as sacred. The physical space held meaning and shaped their experiences. From the altar to the pulpit, the building was not just a structure, but a place where they encountered God, reflected, and made sense of their lives.

Together, these themes show how leadership, identity, and personal development were shaped through participation, mentorship, community, and the church environment itself. Taken together, these findings suggest that leadership formation in the Black church is shaped through the integration of participation, mentorship, community, and meaningful space. Leadership is not formed in isolation or through formal instruction alone, but through lived experience within an environment that provides opportunity, guidance, and a sense of belonging. What I witnessed in corrections helps put this into perspective. Many of the issues I saw later in life did not start there. They point back to earlier gaps, especially when there are no consistent spaces to guide and shape young people. When those kinds of spaces are missing, the impact shows up somewhere.

These findings also raise important questions about what happens when these spaces are no longer as present or accessible. The next chapter will explore the implications of these findings for ministry practice and consider how Black churches can continue to function as spaces of leadership development for future generations.

CHAPTER FIVE

The reason why many young people have so many “problems” that need servicing is that they are raised without a culture of community where they are a part of something. They are raised with nothing useful to do, no purpose. The teenage years are difficult under any conditions, but are made more so when teenagers are not needed. In the absence of purpose, they search for the belonging found in social networking.¹

This research began with my experiences in corrections. I saw the outcomes, but I kept thinking about what was missing earlier. What I was seeing did not begin in that moment. It pointed back to something earlier. In many cases, there were gaps in formation, with young people not consistently connected to spaces that offered guidance, responsibility, and community. The findings point to the Black church as one of the spaces where that kind of formation once occurred.

This connects directly to what participants shared. They consistently described how their involvement in the Black church gave them a sense of purpose, responsibility, and belonging. Rather than being passive observers, they were given roles, expectations, and opportunities to contribute, which shaped their understanding of leadership over time.

When looking across these findings, a clear pattern begins to emerge. Taken together, these findings point to a clear pattern: leadership development is not primarily program-based, but formational. It develops through consistent presence, active participation, intergenerational relationships, and responsibility over time. Together,

¹ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 67.

these elements form a model of leadership development that is rooted in place, participation, mentorship, responsibility, and identity formation.

Theology of Place and Leadership Development

The findings of this research raise important questions about the current role of Black churches in their communities, particularly regarding leadership development among Black youth. Participants consistently described the church not simply as a place of worship but as a space where they were formed through involvement, responsibility, and relationships. Leadership was not something formally taught through structured programs alone, but developed through consistent participation in the life of the church. These findings suggest that the strength of the Black church has historically been rooted in its ability to function as a lived community rather than a program-centered institution. However, the changing landscape of many Black churches presents a challenge to this model. As churches experience declining membership, reduced financial resources, and shifts in community engagement, maintaining this kind of formative environment is increasingly strained. When the church is no longer a consistent presence in the life of young people, the opportunities for leadership development that once emerged naturally within these spaces begin to diminish.

The findings of this research suggest that leadership development in the Black church is deeply tied to presence, participation, and proximity. Young people developed leadership skills because they were present in the space, given opportunities to serve, and surrounded by individuals who modeled responsibility and faith. When these elements are absent, leadership development becomes more difficult to cultivate. This raises an important implication for Black churches today: leadership formation cannot be

outsourced or treated as an occasional activity. It must be embedded in the everyday life of the church. When that kind of formation is not there, it does not just disappear. It shows up in other places, including education and incarceration, where systems are left to respond to what was never developed.

Additionally, the findings challenge churches to reconsider how space is being used. The physical church building played a significant role in participants' experiences, not just as a structure, but as a place where relationships were formed and identity was shaped. As some churches face the reality of maintaining large or underutilized buildings, there is an opportunity to reimagine these spaces as active community hubs once again. This may require moving beyond traditional uses of the building's traditional uses and creating spaces that invite consistent engagement from both youth and the broader community.

There is also an implication for how churches view young people within their congregations. Participants in this research were not passive recipients of ministry; they were active contributors to the life of the church. They were trusted with responsibility, given visible roles, and expected to participate. This suggests that leadership development occurs when young people are not simply included, but when they are needed. Churches that desire to foster leadership among youth must create environments where young people are given meaningful roles and are seen as essential to the community, rather than peripheral.

Finally, these findings call Black churches to reclaim a vision of themselves as community-forming institutions. Historically, the Black church has served as a space where individuals were shaped not only spiritually, but also socially and culturally. The

decline of this function is not only a loss for the church but for the broader community. Reclaiming this role will require intentional effort, adaptability, and a willingness to rethink how ministry is practiced in changing contexts. The question is no longer simply how to maintain the church, but how to remain present in a way that continues to form people for leadership, responsibility, and community life.

The goal of this research is to make clear that leadership development among Black youth is deeply connected to presence, participation, and relationships within the life of the church. As these spaces shift or diminish, the question is no longer only how leadership has been formed, but where this formation will take place moving forward. This raises important implications for how churches understand their role as formative spaces within their communities.

The Formation Gap and Broader Implications

Changes in the institutional stability and physical presence of Black churches do more than alter where people gather. They reshape the environments where leadership has traditionally been formed. Throughout this research, participants consistently described how leadership developed through participation, relationships, and responsibility within the life of the church. These were not isolated experiences. They were tied to a stable place where formation could happen over time.

This research suggests a clear pattern: when place-based, relational environments are no longer present or accessible, opportunities for leadership formation decrease. As a result, the effects of that disruption begin to surface beyond the church itself.

In education, this may appear as disengagement, limited support systems, or fewer opportunities for young people to develop confidence and responsibility. In community

life, it may be seen in weakened social networks and fewer spaces where intergenerational relationships can take root. In broader social systems, including incarceration, these gaps in formation may contribute to long-term consequences for individuals who were never given consistent opportunities to be shaped within supportive environments.

This is not to suggest that the church is the only place where leadership can develop. However, this research demonstrates that it has historically been a primary place where this kind of formation occurred for many Black youth.

The implication, then, is not only theological but practical. If formation is tied to place, participation, and relationships, then the weakening of those spaces requires intentional reimagining. The question is no longer simply whether churches will survive, but whether they will remain spaces where formation can still take place.

Implications for Ministry Practice

The findings of this research point to a need for churches to reconsider how ministry is practiced, particularly regarding the formation of young people. What emerged from the participants was not a model of ministry built primarily on formal programs, but one rooted in presence, participation, and relationship. Leadership development did not happen because of a structured curriculum, but because young people were actively involved in the everyday life of the church. This suggests that effective ministry practice cannot rely solely on programming but must be grounded in creating spaces where individuals are consistently engaged and formed through experience.

Toward Culturally Conscious Formation

This research shows that the Black church has been a consistent place where leadership formation happens. Participants described being involved over time by serving, learning, being mentored, and taking on responsibility. These experiences did not come from programs, but from being present and engaged in the life of the church. As leaders, we are not forming leaders. We are participating in their formation.

At the same time, this study points to a challenge within the church. While formation is happening, it is not always intentional, particularly regarding socio-political awareness or racial consciousness. In some cases, we are doing what we were taught, but not always addressing what young people are dealing with right now.

Because of this, we have to be more intentional about how Black identity is included in the process of formation. Formation cannot only focus on spiritual development. It also has to help young people understand who they are, what they are facing, and how they move through the world as Black youth.

Formation that ignores identity is incomplete. If we are going to continue to participate in their formation, then identity, culture, and lived experience have to be part of that process, not separate from it.

Cultural Humility and Institutional Accountability

This also requires a shift from cultural competency to cultural humility. Cultural competency can give the impression that something can be learned and completed. Cultural humility does not work that way. It is ongoing. It requires self-reflection, a willingness to learn, and an understanding that we do not have all the answers.

In the church, this means we have to be open to the lived experiences of the people we are called to serve. It also requires us to be aware of power and how it shows

up in leadership, in decision-making, and in whose voices are heard. If we are participating in their formation, we must also be willing to examine ourselves in that process.

This also raises the question of institutional accountability. The church cannot form people in isolation from the community it serves. We cannot meet needs if we are unaware of what those needs are. Formation requires partnership. It requires listening, not just leading.

Participation Must Be Intentional

One of the clearest implications for ministry practice is the importance of participation. Participants described learning leadership by doing—whether through speaking in church, serving in ministries, or taking on specific roles. These opportunities were not always labeled as leadership formation, yet they played a significant role in shaping confidence, responsibility, and identity. For ministry leaders, this raises the question of how often young people are given meaningful opportunities to contribute. A ministry that is centered on observation rather than participation limits the potential for growth. If leadership development is a goal, then participation must be intentional and consistent.

Mentorship Must Be Relational

Another implication is the role of mentorship within the life of the church. Participants consistently pointed to the presence of older individuals who guided them, corrected them, and modeled what it meant to live out their faith. These relationships were not formalized, yet they were foundational to leadership formation. This suggests that ministry practice must prioritize intergenerational relationships. Churches cannot

assume that mentorship will happen naturally without creating environments where these relationships can form. Leaders must be attentive to how young people are being supported, who is speaking into their lives, and whether there are opportunities for consistent guidance and accountability.

Consistency Matters

The findings also highlight the importance of consistency in ministry. Many participants described being in church regularly, sometimes multiple times a week. This consistent presence allowed for deeper relationships, repeated opportunities for involvement, and ongoing formation. In contrast, when engagement becomes sporadic, the depth of formation is often limited. This presents a challenge for ministry practice in a context where attendance patterns have shifted. Churches must consider how to create consistent points of engagement that allow for sustained involvement, even in changing circumstances.

Space Must Be Activated

In addition, the use of space emerges as a critical component of ministry practice. The church building was not simply a backdrop for ministry, but an active environment where formation took place. Participants referenced specific areas within the church—sanctuaries, fellowship halls, and classrooms—as places where they learned, served, and built relationships. This suggests that ministry leaders must think intentionally about how space is being used. Rather than viewing the building as a static structure, consider it a resource for engagement. This may involve opening the space for community activities, creating environments for youth to gather, or reimagining how different areas of the church can support formation.

Youth Must Be Treated as Contributors

Another implication for ministry practice is the need to shift how young people are perceived within the church. Participants were not treated as passive recipients of ministry, but as active members of the community. They were expected to show up, participate, and contribute. This expectation played a significant role in their development. When young people are only seen as individuals to be served, rather than individuals who have something to offer, their growth is limited. Ministry practice must move toward a model that recognizes the capacity of young people and invites them into meaningful roles within the church.

The findings also suggest that leadership development is not a separate aspect of ministry, but something that should be integrated into all areas of church life. Rather than creating isolated leadership programs, churches can embed leadership opportunities within existing ministries. Choirs, usher boards, youth ministries, and community outreach efforts all provide spaces where leadership can be practiced. This integrated approach allows leadership development to become a natural outcome of participation rather than an added component.

Finally, these findings call for a more intentional approach to sustaining ministry in changing contexts. As churches navigate challenges such as declining attendance and limited resources, there is a tendency to focus on preservation. However, the experiences shared by participants suggest that the strength of the church has always been its ability to form people through community. Ministry practice, therefore, must prioritize formation over maintenance. This may require rethinking traditional approaches,

exploring new ways of engaging the community, and being willing to adapt while remaining grounded in the core purpose of the church.

In this sense, ministry is not simply about what is offered, but about what is formed. The question is not only whether programs exist, but whether people are being shaped through their involvement. The findings of this research suggest that when ministry is rooted in participation, relationships, and consistent engagement, leadership development becomes a natural outcome. For churches seeking to cultivate leadership among Black youth, the focus must shift from creating more programs to creating environments where formation can take place.

The findings of this research also point to specific outcomes that emerge from participation in these spaces. Participants described developing confidence, a sense of responsibility, and the ability to lead in both church and community settings. These experiences shaped how they saw themselves and what they believed they were capable of. In this sense, the impact of faith-based community hubs extends beyond spiritual formation to include leadership capacity, identity development, and a sense of purpose. These are not abstract outcomes but lived realities that continue to shape how individuals engage their communities over time. The findings of this research point to a consistent process through which leadership develops. This process is not random and does not depend on structured programs alone. Instead, it reflects a pattern of formation that occurs within the life of the church. What emerges from the data is a place-based, participatory model of leadership formation, where leadership develops through the interaction of place, participation, mentorship, and identity formation.

A Model for Leadership Development in Faith-Based Community Hubs

This research proposes a Place-Based Leadership Formation Model in which leadership development begins within place, is activated through participation, strengthened through mentorship and responsibility, and ultimately leads to a sense of belonging and identity. This model can be understood as a place-based approach to leadership development within the Black church. The findings of this research show that leadership development among Black youth does not primarily happen through formal programs, but through a process of formation that unfolds through participation in the life of the church. Participants did not describe leadership as something they were taught in structured settings. Rather, they learned by being involved, trusted with responsibility, and surrounded by people who expected something of them.

Considering these findings, this model offers a practical way for churches to be more intentional about creating the kind of environment where leadership development already happens.

The purpose of this model is to create consistent opportunities for Black youth to develop leadership through participation in church life, relationships with adults, and meaningful responsibility within the community.

Participation in Church Life

Young people are integrated into the life of the church through active involvement in worship, ministry roles, and church activities. They are not positioned as observers, but as participants.

Mentorship and Intergenerational Relationships

Young people grow through consistent interaction with adults who model responsibility, faith, and accountability. These relationships develop over time through shared experiences, not just assigned roles. Over time, these experiences shape how young people see themselves, including their identity, confidence, and sense of purpose.

Sense of Belonging

The church must function as a place where young people know they belong. This includes both physical presence and relational connection. When youth experience the church as a space where they are known and valued, they are more likely to engage and grow.

Responsibility and Visibility

Leadership develops when young people are given real responsibility. This includes opportunities to serve, speak, organize, and contribute to the life of the church in visible ways.

This model does not require the creation of new programs. Instead, it calls for a shift in how the church uses what already exists. Ministry leaders identify consistent opportunities for youth to be involved and ensure that their participation is meaningful. Spaces for reflection can be created through regular gatherings where youth talk about their experiences, what they are learning, and where they are being challenged. These moments allow leaders to remain attentive to their development and strengthen relationships across generations.

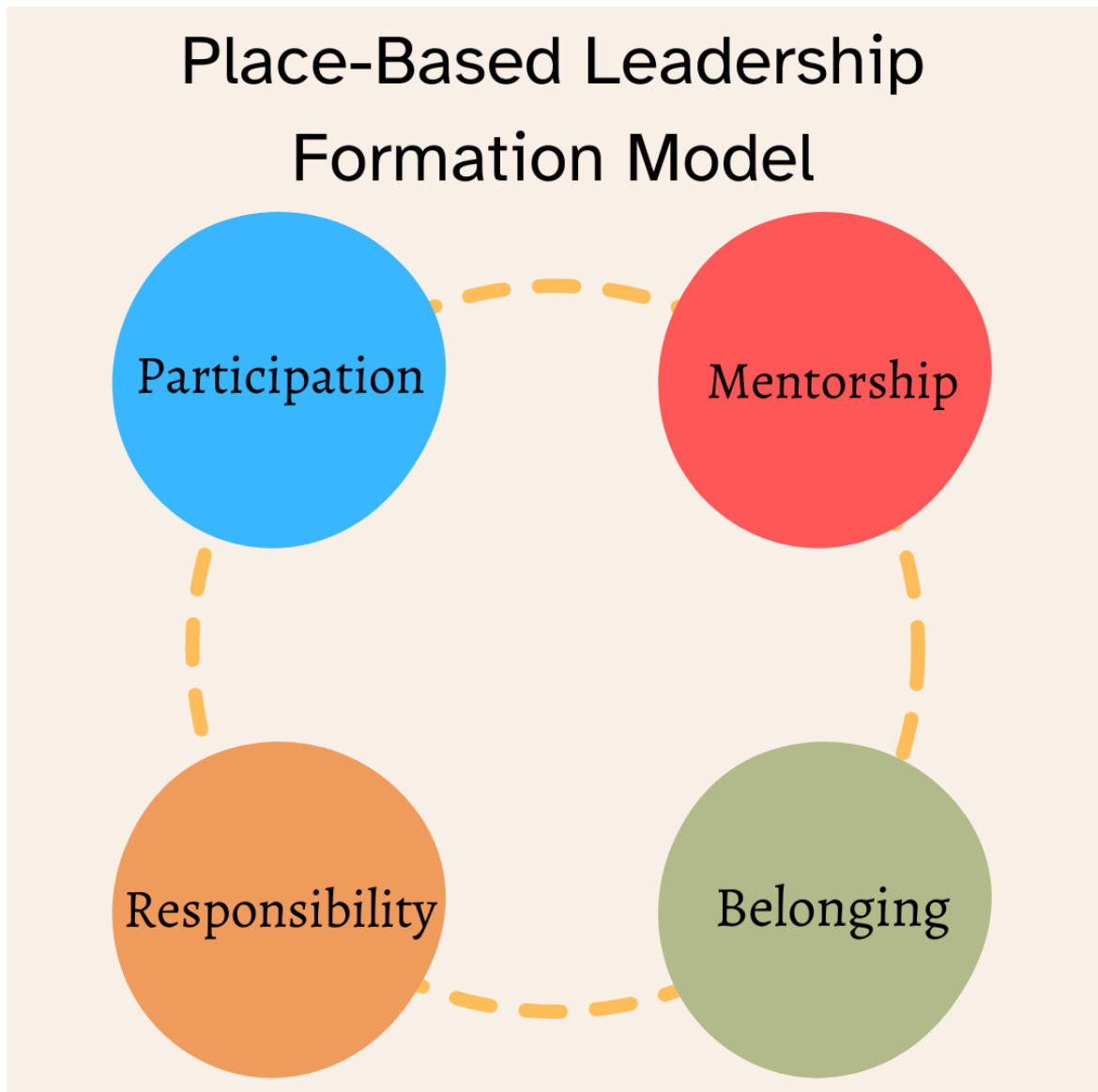
When youth are consistently involved in the life of the church, leadership development becomes visible over time. This includes growth in confidence, identity, and

a sense of responsibility. Leadership is not limited to formal positions but is reflected in how young people carry themselves in everyday life.

This model also strengthens the church as a faith-based community hub. As participation increases and relationships deepen, the church becomes a space where leadership is continuously formed through shared experience.

This reflects not only what emerged from the research, but also what I have witnessed in my own ministry context, where leadership develops through presence, participation, and responsibility within the life of the church.

This model is illustrated below to show how leadership formation develops through ongoing participation within the life of the church.



Place-Based Leadership Formation Model

Sustainability and Funding Models for Faith-Based Community Hubs

The findings of this research raise an important question that cannot be ignored: how do churches sustain the kind of environments that once formed leaders when the traditional model of relying on tithes and offerings is no longer enough? While participants described powerful experiences of leadership formation through presence,

participation, and relationships, those same conditions require stability. Without sustainable resources, the spaces that once formed leaders begin to disappear.

My own field-based observations reinforced this reality. During a site visit to Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Morristown, New Jersey, I had the opportunity to observe the adaptive reuse of the church's kitchen and fellowship hall in partnership with Spring Street CDC. Upon arriving at the food pantry, it became clear that both Bethel A.M.E. Church and Spring Street CDC were making a significant social impact on the community they serve. Despite the distribution not beginning for several hours, individuals were already lined up outside, and cars were positioned throughout the parking lot. What I witnessed was not simply a church program, but a coordinated system of care that extended beyond the congregation itself.

This experience made visible what is often discussed in theory. As religious leaders, we often grapple with funding ministry initiatives, recognizing that reliance solely on tithes and offerings may not be sustainable. Lessons from this site visit underscored the importance of engaging with the marketplace for ministry formation. This includes researching community needs, securing funding from various sources, and actively participating in community engagement. This approach transcends the congregation's resources by fostering partnerships and addressing community needs in a more holistic way.

One of the most practical insights I gained was the importance of implementing systems that support sustainability. In conversation with community leaders, it became clear that tools such as volunteer management systems are not just administrative, but essential for capturing the kind of data required to secure future funding. Without these

structures in place, even impactful ministries can struggle to demonstrate their value to potential funders. This reflects a shift from informal ministry models to more organized and accountable systems that position churches to access broader financial support.

A similar pattern emerged during a site visit to Washington, D.C., where I observed adaptive reuse in a different context. At Emory Fellowship, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Joseph Daniels, the church responded to financial struggle and the threat of closure by reimagining how its space could be used. Through the creation of the Emory Beacon of Light, a 501(c)(3) community development organization, the church developed a mixed-use facility that includes housing for low-income families and permanent supportive housing. This was not simply about preserving a building, but about aligning space with mission in a way that could be sustained over time.

These examples highlight that sustainability is not separate from ministry; it is part of how ministry continues. Adaptive reuse, community development corporations, and partnerships with external organizations allow churches to remain present in their communities even as traditional models decline. At the same time, these approaches require a shift in how churches understand their role. Rather than functioning only as places of worship, churches are increasingly called to function as hubs that connect spiritual formation with social impact, resource development, and community engagement.

At the same time, these models also reveal challenges. During my observations, it became evident that sustainability is not guaranteed simply by creating new structures. In some cases, limited board diversity, lack of creativity, and weakened social capital can hinder long-term effectiveness. When social capital is not actively bridged, opportunities

for growth and impact become limited. This reinforces the importance of leadership that is not only spiritually grounded but also capable of navigating partnerships, systems, and community relationships.

What these field experiences make clear is that sustaining leadership development among Black youth requires more than preserving tradition. It requires reimagining how church spaces are funded, structured, and engaged with the broader community. The same spaces that once formed leaders through participation must now be supported through models that ensure their continued presence. If leadership formation is tied to place, then sustaining that place becomes a critical part of the work.

These insights are not only theoretical or observational for me; they directly inform the work I am engaged in within my own ministry context. As I continue to develop faith-based community initiatives through Union A.M.E. Church and its community development efforts, I am increasingly aware that sustainability must be built into the vision from the beginning. This includes thinking beyond internal giving, forming strategic partnerships, and creating systems that support both ministry and long-term impact.

What I observed in these site visits has helped shape how I approach this work. The goal is not simply to create programs, but to cultivate spaces that are active, resourced, and connected to the community in meaningful ways. If these spaces are going to continue to form leaders, they must also be supported in ways that allow them to remain present, accessible, and responsive to the needs of the people they serve.

Scalability, Funding, and Broader Application

While this research is grounded in the Black church as a faith-based community hub, it also raises questions that go beyond a single church or ministry setting. What emerges from this research is not just a description of one context, but a way of understanding how leadership develops when young people are consistently present, involved, and connected to a community.

Participants did not describe leadership as something they learned through formal programs. Instead, they described it as something that developed over time through being present, being involved, and being trusted with responsibility. They talked about showing up, being given opportunities to serve, and being surrounded by people who expected something of them. Over time, those experiences shaped their confidence, identity, and sense of purpose.

These patterns also make it possible to recognize how leadership formation occurs. This research showed that consistent participation, increasing responsibility, and growth in identity. Young people were not just attending; they were becoming part of the life of the church. They were trusted with roles, and those roles grew over time. As that happened, they began to see themselves differently. They spoke with more confidence, took initiative, and understood themselves as people who had something to offer.

At the same time, it is important to be clear about the role of the Black church in this work. The Black church is not just one example among many. It holds a unique place in the history and life of Black communities, where spiritual formation, community life, and social responsibility come together. This research does not suggest that other spaces can replace that role or fully reproduce it. What it suggests is that there are conditions

within these spaces that consistently support leadership formation. Participation, relationships, and responsibility were central to participants' experiences. While these conditions cannot simply be copied, they can be taken seriously.

Other spaces, such as schools or community organizations, may not function in the same way as the Black church, but they can learn from what has taken place within it. When young people are consistently present, when they are known, when they are expected to contribute, and when they are given real responsibility, something begins to develop over time. The setting may be different, but the process of formation still matters.

This also matters for how this work is understood beyond the church. For those who fund or support youth development, this research underscores the importance of creating environments where young people are not just served but also formed. It shifts the focus away from short-term programs and toward long-term engagement. For those doing the work on the ground, it offers a way of thinking about leadership that is not based on titles, but on presence, responsibility, and growth over time.

What this research ultimately points to is simple, but important. Leadership is not something that appears all at once. It is formed over time, in places where people are present, connected, and expected to grow. The Black church has been one of those places, and it remains a critical space for that kind of formation, even as its role continues to change.

This dissertation reframes how leadership formation among Black youth is understood. Rather than locating leadership development in formal programs or

structured instruction alone, this research shows that leadership is formed through participation in place-based, relational, faith-centered community environments.

In this way, this dissertation contributes to existing scholarship by shifting the focus from programmatic models of leadership development to a place-based understanding of formation. It highlights the Black church as a critical site where leadership is not simply taught but lived and developed through ongoing participation in the life of the community.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this research open the door for further exploration into the relationship between Black churches, place, and leadership development among Black youth. While this research provides insight into how leadership is formed through participation in faith-based community hubs, it also reveals areas that require deeper examination. The experiences shared by participants reflect patterns that extend beyond individual stories, suggesting the need for continued research that builds on these findings and explores them in broader and more diverse contexts.

One area for future research is the impact of generational differences on leadership development within the Black church. This study included participants from two age groups, which provided some perspective on how experiences may have remained consistent or shifted over time. However, additional research could examine younger generations more closely, particularly those who are growing up in a time when church participation is less consistent. Understanding how leadership formation is occurring, or not occurring, among younger individuals could provide important insight into how churches might adapt their approach to remain effective in forming leaders.

Another area that warrants further study is the role of church decline and institutional change in shaping leadership opportunities. Participants in this research reflected on experiences rooted in churches that were active and engaged in their communities. As many churches today face challenges such as declining membership, reduced resources, and changing patterns of attendance, future research could explore how these shifts are affecting the ability of churches to function as spaces of leadership formation. This includes examining how adaptive reuse, community partnerships, and alternative models of ministry may influence leadership development in changing contexts.

Future research could also explore the experiences of individuals who did not grow up in church environments. This research focused on those with direct involvement in the Black church, providing valuable insight into how leadership is formed in that context. However, comparing these experiences with those of individuals who did not have similar exposure could help clarify the unique role that the church plays in leadership development. Such research could also highlight what may be missing in other environments where community-based formation is less present.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to examine leadership development within different denominational and cultural contexts. While this research focused on Black church experiences, future research could explore how similar or different patterns emerge in other faith traditions or cultural settings. This comparative approach could help identify which aspects of leadership formation are unique to the Black church and which may be present across various communities of faith.

Another important area for future research is the role of mentorship and intergenerational relationships. While this research identified mentorship as a key factor

in leadership development, further research could examine how these relationships are formed, sustained, and experienced across different church contexts. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships could provide practical insight for ministry leaders seeking to intentionally cultivate mentorship within their congregations.

There is also a need for research that focuses more directly on the role of physical space in shaping leadership development. While this research explored the concept of place through participants' experiences, future research could examine how specific aspects of church space contribute to formation. This might include looking at how different environments within the church are used, how space influences participation, and how changes to physical structures impact engagement. Such research would further develop the connection between Theology of Place and practical ministry.

Finally, future research could explore the long-term impact of leadership development that occurs within the Black church. Participants in this research reflected on experiences from their youth, but additional research could examine how these experiences continue to shape individuals over time. This includes looking at how early leadership opportunities influence career paths, community involvement, and ongoing participation in faith communities. Longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of how leadership formation within the church extends beyond adolescence into adulthood.

Overall, this research provides a foundation for continued exploration into how faith-based community hubs contribute to leadership development. The findings suggest that leadership formation is deeply connected to participation, relationships, and place. Future research can expand on these insights by examining diverse populations, contexts,

and long-term outcomes. As churches continue to navigate changing realities, ongoing research will be essential in understanding how these spaces can remain effective in forming leaders and supporting the development of future generations.

This research set out to explore how Black churches function as faith-based community hubs that contribute to leadership development among Black youth. The findings indicate that leadership is not formed primarily through structured programs but through consistent participation in the life of the church. These spaces, shaped by relationships, responsibility, and shared experience, have historically created environments where young people are seen, needed, and formed over time.

Through the lens of a Theology of Place, this research shows that the church is more than a physical structure. It is a lived space where identity, faith, and leadership take shape through presence and engagement. When these spaces are active and accessible, they provide opportunities for formation that extend beyond what can be taught in formal settings. However, as churches face changing realities, the ability to sustain these environments is increasingly challenged.

What I witnessed in corrections made this clear for me. The issue is not only what happens when someone enters the system, but what was missing long before that moment. When spaces like the Black church are present, young people are given opportunities to grow, take responsibility, and be part of something. When those spaces are not there, the outcome looks different.

This research began with a question shaped by lived experience: where and how are Black youth being formed as leaders? What emerges from this research is clear. Leadership formation does not happen in isolation or through programs alone. It develops

over time in places where young people are present, known, and expected to grow. The Black church has historically been one of those places. As these spaces continue to shift, the challenge is not only to preserve them, but to remain intentional about creating environments where this kind of formation can still take place. What is at stake is not simply the future of the church, but the formation of those who will lead within and beyond it.

APPENDIX A – INTRODUCTORY LETTER

Dear Participant,

My name is Rev. Crystal E. James, and I am conducting doctoral research at Drew Theological School. My research project is titled “Theology of Place: Faith-Based Community Hubs and Their Role in Fostering Leadership Development Among Black Youth.”

This study explores how Black churches serve as community hubs and influence leadership development among Black youth. You are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview where you will be asked to reflect on your experiences growing up in or around a Black church and how those experiences shaped your identity, sense of belonging, and leadership development.

The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be audio-recorded for research accuracy. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research that may inform future ministry practices and strengthen faith-based leadership development.

Sincerely,
Rev. Crystal E. James
Doctor of Ministry Candidate
Drew Theological School

APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Doctor of Ministry Research – Drew Theological School
 Principal Investigator: Rev. Crystal E. James
 Project Title: Theology of Place: Faith-Based Community Hubs and Their Role in
 Fostering Leadership Development Among Black Youth

This study explores how Black churches serve as community hubs and influence leadership development among Black youth. It examines how the church, as both a physical and spiritual place, shapes identity, belonging, and leadership development.

You will participate in one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription and research purposes.

Your privacy will be protected. Aliases will be used in the dissertation and in any future publications or presentations unless you provide written permission for your real name to be used. Identifying details will be altered when necessary. Audio files and transcripts will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

Participation is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

There are no foreseeable risks beyond everyday conversation. While there is no direct compensation, your participation contributes to research that may strengthen faith-based leadership development.

Findings may be included in a Doctor of Ministry dissertation, academic publications, conference presentations, or ministry development resources. All confidentiality protections will apply.

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the information above. I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Theology of Place:
Faith-Based Community Hubs and Their Role in Fostering Leadership
Development Among Black Youth**

Principal Investigator: Rev. Crystal E. James

Doctor of Ministry Research – Drew Theological School

Participant Demographic & Leadership Profile

All responses will remain confidential.

1. Age Range: 18–25 26–35 36–45 46–55 56+
2. Gender Identity (optional): _____
3. City/State where you primarily grew up: _____
4. Denomination of church attended growing up: _____
5. At what age did you begin regularly attending church? _____
6. Approximately how many total years were you actively involved in a Black church?

7. During your youth (under 18), how frequently did you attend? Weekly Multiple
times/week Monthly Occasionally
8. Did your church close, relocate, or significantly decline during your lifetime? Yes
 No Unsure
9. Did you hold leadership roles inside the church as a youth? Yes No
If yes, please specify (choir, youth ministry, teaching, outreach, etc.):

10. Approximate number of years you held leadership roles in church: _____
11. Have you held leadership roles outside the church? School Professional
Community Ministry Political None
12. Do you believe your church experience directly influenced your leadership outside
the church?

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. Does your childhood church still exist today? Yes No Unsure

14. Did your church own its building, rent, or share space? Owned Rented Shared Unsure

Formation and Early Church Experience

1. Can you describe your earliest memories of being involved in a church? What did a typical week look like?
2. How would you describe the role your church played in shaping your identity (faith, race, confidence, values)?
3. In what ways did your church respond to the social or economic realities of your neighborhood?
4. Did the church provide resources primarily for members, or did it actively serve the broader community?

Theology of Place and Sacred Space

1. When you think about the physical church building, what comes to mind first?
2. Did the building itself feel sacred, empowering, limiting, or something else? Why?
3. How did the location of the church shape your experience?
4. What happened—if anything—when the church experienced decline, relocation, or closure?
5. Do you believe leadership formation depends on a physical place? Why or why not?

Leadership Development and Social Capital

1. Were you given responsibilities at church (leading prayer, organizing events, teaching, advocacy)?
2. Did adults intentionally mentor you? Or did leadership happen informally?
3. Did your church help you build connections beyond the congregation (jobs, college, activism, civic engagement)?
4. Did your church prepare you to navigate unjust systems? Why or why not?
5. Did your church encourage conversations about race, justice, or public life?

Institutional Reality and Sustainability

1. Did your church experience financial or organizational challenges? How did that affect youth?
2. Did you observe partnerships or initiatives beyond tithes and offerings?
3. If the church declined or closed, how did that impact your sense of belonging or leadership pathway?

Reimagining the Faith-Based Hub

1. What would an ideal Black faith-based community hub for youth look like today?
2. What specific leadership skills should it intentionally develop?
3. What partnerships should churches pursue to strengthen youth development?
4. Why should the Black church care about youth leadership today?
5. If the church disappeared from your neighborhood, what would be lost?

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