Back to the Black Church:

Strategies for Reclaiming Disaffected Millennials and Gen Z

A dissertation submitted to the

Theological School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

Advisor: Dr. J. Terry Todd

Willie J. Sullivan, III

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

January 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

BACK TO THE BLACK CHURCH: STRATEGIES FOR RECLAIMING DISAFFECTED MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z

Willie J. Sullivan, III

Connections Church

This Doctor of Ministry project examines declining church participation among Millennials and Gen Zers and proposes a ministry model grounded in belonging, liberation, and hybrid community. Using surveys, focus groups, and evaluation of early ministry prototypes, the study identifies key themes shaping younger adults' engagement, including authenticity, relational trust, leadership transparency, holistic formation, and digital accessibility. Interpreted through Black practical theology, this research demonstrates that younger adults are not rejecting faith but seeking communities marked by integrity, justice, and shared life.

In response, the Connections Formation Model integrates dialogical biblical study, hybrid gathering rhythms, relational cohorts, holistic mentoring, community partnership, and emotionally intelligent leadership. Evaluation indicators emphasize spiritual growth, communal belonging, digital vitality, justice engagement, and leadership health. This project contributes to practical theology by offering a replicable, contextually grounded model of ministry that nurtures belonging and liberation in both digital and embodied spaces.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work first and foremost to God Almighty, whose sustaining grace has carried me through every step of this journey.

I dedicate it to my Aunt Marcine and Aunt Jean, who first ignited my passion for learning and whose steadfast presence continues to anchor my life in love, purpose, and possibility.

I dedicate it to all my nieces and nephews—Uncle Will loves you dearly and holds each of you close to his heart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I give thanks to God, whose guiding hand has steadied me, whose grace has sustained me, and whose presence has been my constant companion throughout this journey.

I honor my late great-grandmother, Florene Sullivan, my grandmother, Minnie Rogers, and my great-uncle, Benjamin (BJ) Sullivan Jr. Though the Black Church served as my first theological classroom, you were my earliest teachers. Through your lives and expressions of love, I first learned the language of faith, resilience, and sacred hope.

I honor my Aunt Jean, who ushered me into the beauty and depth of the Black Church tradition and taught me both the posture and power of prayer.

I honor my Aunt Marcine, whose sacrifice and steadfast love created the conditions through which my own life could flourish.

I honor my father, Willie James Sullivan, Jr., whose perseverance and quiet strength have become wells from which I draw more deeply as I grow older.

To all my family who stood in the gap—faithfully doing when my parents could not do—I offer my sincere and heartfelt gratitude. Your presence and support have carried me farther than words can hold.

I acknowledge the mentors who have shaped my path: Pastor Mark Twyman, who provided my ministerial grounding, orientation, and foundation; Calvin Leaks, who taught me what loyalty and friendship look like in practice; and the late Mr. Ed Menifee, who impressed upon me the enduring truth that the dictionary is the only place where reward comes before work.

To my circle of closest friends—Talisa Burke, Shavonne Brown, Lyuana Austin, Michael Lowe, Jamel Clarke, and Anthony Howard—you have been confidants, intercessors, truth-tellers, and companions on the journey. In seasons when I was stretched to my limits, you stepped in with strength, wisdom, and prayer. I could not have completed this work without the ways each of you poured into my life.

I also honor my dear friend and brother, Rev. Dr. Aaron B. Wade, whose encouragement led me to pursue seminary and whose steadfast support remains a blessing to my life and ministry.

Finally, I give thanks for the professors who shaped my academic journey. I am especially grateful to Rev. Dr. Terry Todd, my advisor, and Rev. Dr. Anthony Hunt, my professional mentor. Your insight, challenges, guidance, and encouragement have left an indelible mark on both my scholarship and my ministry. I remain profoundly and eternally grateful.

AI tools (ChatGPT) were used in limited ways to support the writing process, including editorial refinement, structural organization, and formatting assistance. These tools did not generate the research findings, theological interpretations, ministry model, or analytical conclusions. All core content, arguments, and insights are the sole work of the researcher.

GLOSSARY

1. **Authenticity:** The perceived alignment between a church's professed beliefs, leadership practices, and lived behavior, characterized by transparency, moral consistency, relational integrity, and emotional honesty. In this study, authenticity emerged from focus group data as a primary criterion by which Black Millennials and Generation Z evaluate leadership credibility, institutional trust, and sustained engagement.

2. **Churched:** Adults who consistently attend worship and actively participate in church life.

3. **Current Cultural Moment:** The convergence of social, economic, political, technological, and spiritual conditions shaping contemporary experiences of faith, leadership, and community, particularly among Black Millennials and Generation Z. In this study, the current cultural moment is marked by declining institutional trust, digital and AI-mediated identity formation, heightened awareness of mental health and trauma, economic precarity, political polarization, and evolving expectations of authenticity, transparency, and relational credibility within the Church.

4. **Dechurched:** Adults who previously attended church but no longer do so.

5. **Disaffected:** Black adults ages 18–45 who have disengaged from active participation in the Black Church because of diminished experiences of belonging, breaches of trust, perceived irrelevance of institutional structures, or the absence of meaningful inclusion. This group encompasses individuals who maintain cultural or spiritual ties to the Black Church tradition yet no longer find its current expressions resonant, responsive, or life-giving.

6. **Holistic:** An approach to ministry and formation that attends to the full scope of human life, including spiritual, emotional, relational, economic, and physical dimensions. Within this project, a holistic orientation reflects participants' desire for faith communities that address lived realities such as mental health, economic stress, trauma, and relational well-being rather than isolating spirituality from everyday life.

7. **Integrated Community:** A form of Christian community characterized by ongoing relational engagement across multiple areas of life rather than confinement to a single time or worship setting. In this study, an integrated community reflects the desire for faith to be practiced within everyday spaces and rhythms—such as shared meals, social gatherings, and digital interactions—where spiritual formation, care, and belonging are woven into the totality of life rather than limited to Sunday worship.

8. **Leadership Practices:** Behaviors, postures, and approaches that shape how leaders engage congregants and communities.

9. **Unchurched:** Adults with little or no church background or involvement.

10. **Virtual Embodiment:** The intentional practice of cultivating active participation, relational presence, and communal engagement within digital environments. In this study, virtual embodiment moves beyond passive online consumption toward forms of interaction that foster dialogue, accountability, and shared spiritual life, particularly within hybrid or digitally mediated expressions of church.

INTRODUCTION

My Context and Ministry Problem

Theological Framing and Context

My affinity for the Black Church began long before I had language for theology, ecclesiology, or spiritual formation. It emerged from my lived experience, which included the textures of childhood survival, the search for belonging, and the early stirrings of a God who found me before I found God. I grew up in the Pleasant Hill neighborhood of Macon, Georgia, a community that older members of my family remember as a vibrant hub of Black life in their youth. Their stories are filled with memories of fun family gatherings and communal respect from a neighborhood full of working Black professionals making the best of life in the segregated South. Pleasant Hill is the place where my great-grandfather would establish our family home, which for decades stood as the nexus of our family unit. But most of my earliest memories of Pleasant Hill bore a different character, one shaped by extreme poverty, violence, addiction, and the daily struggle just to endure.

My Story as Theological Grounding

Growing up in the early 1980s, I knew hunger as a constant companion, felt safe on the streets where I knew drug addicts by name, and was all too familiar with roaches and rodents as housemates. In those formative years, for me Pleasant Hill was a place where survival was a learned instinct rather than an abstract concept. My formative years were marked not by stability but by upheaval, where constant moving from place to place was the norm. Legally married but separated, both my parents struggled with drug

addiction, and my mother, along with having abusive and violent tendencies, also suffers from mental illness, challenges that persist and present to this day.

Just before my sixth birthday, the Department of Family and Children Services removed my brother and me from my mother's care due to neglect and abuse. Held by grace, my brother and I were fortunate that a maternal aunt, not wanting us to end up with strangers, agreed to take us in and care for us. While I would eventually return to my mother's care, my brother having gone to live with his father, the rupture of being taken from home and from the woman who birthed me sowed a seed of discontent as the months spent living with my aunt created the backdrop of a canvas that was starkly different than what I was used to. Until that moment, the only sustained reality I knew was the one created by my mother. The alternate reality that living with my aunt provided, etched into my spirit a longing for protection, belonging, and divine presence.

The series of unstable transitions continued throughout my early years of my childhood. When I was eight years old my mother, pawned all our belongings for cash, intending to use the money to finance our move to Minneapolis, MN where she planned marry the musician, Prince. The time I had spent living with my aunt had provided me with a different perspective of what normal looked like, and even then, I knew that what my mother was planning was not normal. There was part within me that struggled to understand how a parent could leave without knowing where her child was. That wound of abandonment stayed with me well into adulthood.

Yet even in that moment of confusion and fear, I now recognize God's prevenient grace at work. God guided my small steps across town to my father's house, where I lived for the next two years before another move—to Atlanta—introduced new

challenges. During that time, I witnessed domestic violence between my father and his girlfriend, and I experienced police brutality against my father—traumas that still surface whenever I am confronted by law enforcement because some wounds leave echoes.

Driven by drug-induced instability, there was a couple of month period when my father and his girlfriend abandoned me and his late parents' house we were living in after the lights got shut off. Left me under the care of an elderly neighbor, my late grandmother's best friend, there were times I would go and sit in my late grandparents' empty house, lonely and longing for the familiarity of family. These ruptures became both the sources of trauma and the seeds of theological curiosity. I began asking questions about God long before I knew theology existed. The God I sought was not an abstract figure of the stories in the Children's Bible I found; I was searching for a God who could make sense of abandonment, violence, and resilience.

When God Found Me: Early Formation and the Church as Refuge

Everything shifted when one of my paternal aunts invited me to church. At Greater Vineville Baptist Church, the sanctuary opened to me like a long-lost home. Through the preaching of Rev. Wayne Barrion, through the hymns that echoed the hope of generations, and through the embrace of elders who called me "son," I felt, perhaps for the first time, that I belonged. The Black Church became my refuge, my theological classroom where spiritual truths were not merely taught but embodied.

Greater Vineville became not only a sanctuary but a counter-narrative to the hardships of my life. The messages of God's love, protection, and guidance felt like water on parched ground. Worship awakened in me a sense of belonging I had never felt before, both an anchoring and a spiritual homecoming. It was there that I encountered a

communal warmth that life had not yet afforded me. The Black Church did what Black churches have always done—it affirmed my humanity.

Tony Evans notes that historically, the Black Church emerged as a convergence of enslaved Africans' search for meaning, African religious foundations, and a biblical narrative that promised liberation.[1] That same liberative energy shaped my early encounters with God. Spirituals and hymns like "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand," "We've Come This Far by Faith," and "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" were not simply songs; they were theological frameworks. They taught me that God was a sustainer, a way-maker, and a bridge over troubled water, for me they offered meaning where my life held chaos.

The Black Church as My First Theological Classroom

Lisa Allen-McLaurin writes that Black worship is grounded in "liturgy, justice, and communal righteousness," forming a space where African cosmologies and Christian hope converge.[2] Without knowing her scholarship at the time, I lived its truth. Every shout, every call-and-response, every communal prayer helped shape my spiritual imagination, reminding me that my life was tethered to a people who had survived far worse and believed in a God who never abandoned them.

It was in that sacred space, at nine years old, that I walked down the aisle unprompted and told Rev. Barrion, "I want to give my life to God." And just as the early

---

[1] Tony Evans, *A Survey of the Black Church in America: Exploring Its History, Ministry, and Unique Strengths* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2024), 9–12.

[2] Lisa Allen-McLaurin, *A Womanist Theology of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 22–24.

Black Church restored dignity to those whom society devalued[3], the church restored mine. It was the one place where I did not have to be concerned with navigating violence and instability; it was the place where I was afforded the opportunity, even if only for a few hours on Sunday, to escape the turmoil that pervaded my life.

When I was ten, God introduced stability into my life, when I moved to the suburbs of Atlanta to live with a different aunt. It was a transformative experience, one for which I am eternally grateful, as it yet again stretched my imagination for how life could be. With this move also came a change of church. In my preteen through teen years, I attended Greenforest Baptist Church in Decatur, GA under the leadership of the late Rev. Dr. George McCalep. Whereas Rev. Barrion was a charismatic anecdotal preacher who delivered emotionally moving sermons, Rev. McCalep was a masterful teacher who skillfully blended the joy of the Gospel with thoughtful, exegetical expository preaching.

Most impactful however, was my attendance to Greenforest's afterschool program, my access to its library, and my participation in the many community-focused programs offered by the church. I began to understand that the Black Church could do more than provide a promise for tomorrow, it could tangibly affect my today. Before I ever had a class on hermeneutics, these contrasting experiences with the Church equipped me to consider God and the Bible through different lenses, and the Black Church became the soil where my identity, faith, and calling took root. Just as the early Black Church served as a sanctuary for the spirit, a community for the disenfranchised, and an

[3] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 17–21.

institution for the public witness of God's justice, I realized that similarly, my own story is but a small thread woven into that larger tapestry.

Calling, Identity, and Emergence of the Ministry Problem

When Story Becomes Calling: The Theological Shape of My Vocation

My journey toward ministry did not begin with a burning bush or a blinding light. It began in quiet ways—in the pews of Greater Vineville, in the tenderness of elders who called me "son," and in the hymns that ministered to wounds I could not name. It began in the recognition that God had been present in every moment of displacement, abandonment, and survival. What I interpreted as hardship, God was shaping into calling. In hindsight, I see clearly that God was forming me long before I knew what formation meant. God was cultivating in me a sensitivity to suffering, an intuition for the marginalized, and an instinctual love for the Church even when the Church itself has not always reciprocated that love. The Black Church, with all its imperfections, contradictions, and glories, became the place where I first learned to hope.

During my years at Morehouse College, after I acknowledged that God was indeed calling me, that calling gained language and clarity when I changed my major from Chemistry to Religion. While in Dr. Beletia Diamond's course on the History of the Black Church at Spelman College, I discovered the theological tradition that had formed me long before I recognized it. The Black Church, born in resistance and sustained through struggle, had nurtured my early faith without my awareness. Henry Louis Gates describes this tradition as "a counterworld of spiritual resistance" forged by enslaved Africans who refused to surrender their humanity[4]. In that classroom, I realized my story

[4] Gates, *Black Church*, 17–21.

was not isolated, rather it was part of a larger narrative of Black survival, dignity, and divine encounter.

As I reflected on my upbringing, I saw that God had been preparing me for ministry through every experience of abandonment, every encounter with violence, and every embrace of the Black Church's communal love. My vocation became inseparable from the theological truth that God meets us where we are broken and calls us toward healing, sometimes privately but also collectively, in community.

The Black Church as Theological Home and Growing Tension

While the Black Church became my first theological classroom, eventually it also became a site of theological tension. As I matured spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually, I found myself wrestling with questions the Church did not always invite, questions about inclusion, justice, sexuality, identity, and the changing needs of emerging generations. Like many Black Christians, I discovered that the ecclesial and theological traditions that nurtured me did not always know what to do with my whole self. As a Black man who grew up in the inner city and the suburbs, my identity was marked by several intersections that challenged the dominant theological assumptions of many of the churches I served. I experienced firsthand how exclusion, whether intentional or systemic, can cause spiritual dislocation for those who do not fit neatly into the expectations of traditional Black Church culture.

Kelly Brown Douglas's framework of "socio-cultural epistemological privilege" provided language for my experiences.[5] She argues that dominant cultural narratives

[5] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 45-47.

silence marginalized voices by discrediting their knowledge before it is spoken. Although her analysis centers anti-Blackness, its structure mirrors the ways heteronormativity, patriarchy, and respectability politics operate within the Black Church and shape what counts as "legitimate" knowing. In too many churches, the marginalized are asked to worship, but not to speak; to serve, but not to shape.

This tension deepened as I began serving in various ministerial capacities—Assistant Pastor, Elder, Pastor—across Baptist, Full Gospel, non-denominational, Pentecostal-leaning, and UCC contexts. Each space revealed both the brilliance and the brokenness of the Black Church. I saw churches deeply committed to justice, liberation, and prophetic witness. But I also saw congregations where fear of cultural change led to exclusionary practices, shame-based theology, and an inability to engage the complexities of contemporary life.

The Emergence of the Ministry Problem

The ministry problem at the heart of this dissertation emerged gradually through years of lived experience and pastoral observation. When I reflect on conversations with peers, friends, congregants, and former churchgoers, a pattern becomes unmistakable, a pattern that creates a sinking feeling in the well of my soul: The Black Church stands at a critical crossroads, where longstanding patterns of decline call the community toward renewal and transformation.

When I talk to avid churchgoers in my life, they don't see or recognize this trend, but further inquiry often reveals that their conversations are also limited in this area. I recall speaking with one cousin, who declared that her church was seeing new members join every week. From the conversation I realized that Church migration, the movement

of members from one church to another, is perhaps skewing our ability to see just how dire the situation is becoming.

Pew Research Center reports a dramatic decline in Christian affiliation over the last decade, with the most rapid disaffection occurring among Millennials and Gen Z.[16] While this trend is consistent across racial lines, its implications for Black communities are uniquely concerning. The Black Church, long a source of spiritual stability, political strategy, and communal care, is seeing its influence wane at a moment when structural racism, economic inequality, and social fragmentation remain pervasive.

In my own ministry context, the shift became unmistakable. Conversations that once centered on which service friends would attend on Sunday morning transformed into explanations:

- "I watch online now."
- "I don't feel like church is for me anymore."
- "I'm spiritual, but I don't do institutionalized religion."
- "The Church is a scam."
- "People at church are hypocritical."

These declarations were not expressions of apathy, but statements of theological lament. I believe they reveal the deep longing for belonging, relevance, and authenticity, factors that had once drawn entire generations to the Black Church.

Stephanie Boddie notes that historically, the Black Church thrived in moments of social upheaval by adapting to meet the needs of the people.[6] Today, however, many Black churches struggle to pivot to meet the current needs of the people as the disconnect between church leadership and the priorities of younger adults creates a widening gap. As

[6] Stephanie Clintonia Boddie, "How Philadelphia's Black Churches Overcame Disease, Depression, and Civil Strife," *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, 2024.

a result, existing leadership tends to gatekeep rather create bridges to the younger generations.

The Black Church is at an inflection point, losing the very people it most needs if it is to remain a source of hope, justice, and community. This loss is not only sociological in nature, but also theological. A Church founded on liberation cannot thrive while excluding or overlooking those who feel displaced. This disconnect forms the ministry problem at the heart of this project: How can the Black Church reclaim its historic mission of liberation, belonging, and communal care in order to reengage Black Millennials and Gen Zers who feel spiritually disconnected, culturally misunderstood, or institutionally unseen?

Ministry Context: Transition and Tension

My ministry context is one in transition. At the onset of this project, my physical location was in Philadelphia, PA while leading a small, online congregation spread along the US eastern coast. While it has since shifted to me being physically located in Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia provides a microcosm of national patterns. The city is rich with Black religious history—AME roots, Baptist legacies, Pentecostal fire, and new congregational expressions. Yet pastors across the city report declining attendance, diminished engagement, and weakened influence among adults ages 25–45. Similarly, the landscape of the Black Church in Atlanta is a historically rooted yet evolving ecclesial ecosystem. It spans Baptist, AME, CME, Pentecostal, and nondenominational traditions, and has long functioned as a center of spiritual formation, civic leadership, social justice activism, and cultural identity. While now navigating generational change, theological diversification,

and megachurch expansion, like Philadelphia, it is experiencing declining institutional affiliation among younger adults.

Urban ministry scholars like Ronald E. Peters argue that urbanization reshapes identity, community, and spiritual practice by altering rhythms of life, social proximity, and cultural exposure.[7] In cities like Atlanta and Philadelphia, these dynamics manifest in high transience, gentrification and displacement, digital alternatives to community, shifting social values, and post-pandemic disengagement. Consequently, for many Black adults ages 25–45, spirituality remains vital, but institutionally mediated religion feels less accessible, less authentic, or less relevant. This reality amplifies a question at the heart of the ministry problem: How does the Black Church minister faithfully in a context shaped by digital culture, racial trauma, institutional distrust, and rapidly shifting social norms?

The Current Cultural Moment

This project emerges within what is best described as a *current cultural moment*—a convergence of social, economic, political, technological, and theological realities that shape how Black Millennials and Gen Zers experience faith, leadership, community, and institutional life. This moment is not defined by a single crisis, but by overlapping pressures that together influence how younger Black adults assess the credibility, relevance, and moral authority of the Black Church.

Marvin McMickle argues that the Black Church has historically functioned as a prophetic institution, particularly when it has interpreted the signs of the times through

[7] Ronald E. Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 14–17.

the lived realities of Black communities. For McMickle, prophetic leadership does not merely denounce injustice; it discerns how social conditions, political forces, and economic arrangements shape both suffering and spiritual imagination. When the Church fails to read these conditions accurately, it risks losing its moral voice—not because the gospel has lost power, but because leadership has lost interpretive clarity.[8]

Within this framework, the current cultural moment is marked by several interrelated conditions:

- Economic precarity and instability
- Political polarization and racialized public life
- Technology-shaped identity and relational engagement
- Declining institutional trust
- Heightened awareness of trauma and mental health
- Shifting expectations of leadership and authority

Taken together, these conditions form the interpretive backdrop against which Black Millennials and Gen Zers evaluate the Church's theological integrity, moral credibility, and capacity for communal care. In keeping with McMickle's insistence that prophetic leadership must be contextually grounded, this study understands generational disengagement not as apathy or spiritual decline, but as a discerning response to ecclesial forms that have struggled to address the economic, political, emotional, and relational realities shaping contemporary Black life.

[8] Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 1–4.

Purpose, Significance, and Research Questions

Purpose of the Study

Drawing from this tenson, the purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project is to explore the causes of disengagement among Black Millennials and Gen Zers and to identify leadership practices that can help reclaim them to the Black Church through collaborative, cooperative, and theologically grounded engagement. This study arises from my own narrative of formation, my pastoral encounters, and a widening generational divide that now challenges the Black Church's ability to sustain its historic mission.

As Stephanie Boddie notes, Black churches historically navigated crises by adapting to the shifting needs of their communities.[9] Today's challenge is no less urgent: younger adults continue to express spiritual longing, yet many struggle to find belonging within the institutional Church. Thus, the purpose of this project is not merely diagnosis, it is constructive. Throughout this study, I aim to excavate leadership practices that reclaim the Black Church's liberative identity and foster renewed belonging and participation among adults ages 18–45.

Significance of the Study

The Black Church Is at a Critical Inflection Point

As noted earlier, national patterns highlight a generational shift that has direct implications for the future of the Black Church. Inherent in this trend is the risk that if

[9] Stephanie Clintonia Boddie, "How Philadelphia's Black Churches Overcame Disease, Depression, and Civil Strife," *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, 2024.

younger Black adults continue to disengage from the Church, the institution risks losing the very demographic essential for sustaining its prophetic voice, communal care, and leadership pipeline. For a tradition historically characterized by resilience and high religious participation, this decline signals an inflection point requiring theological and practical reevaluation. This is important beyond the posterity of the Black Church as an institution, but vital to the ongoing advancement of society. Social transformations driven by the Black Church produced benefits that have been accessed by all marginalized people—this is the liberative nature of the Black Church.

Amplification of Marginalized Voices

The challenge facing today's Black Church is a tendency to silence – and therefore ostracize – diverse voices, maintaining instead static perspectives that uphold the status quo. Kelly Brown Douglas highlights how socio-cultural epistemological privilege creates an environment where dominant narratives determine whose knowledge is considered legitimate.[10] This dynamic is visible in ecclesial spaces where younger adults, queer persons, women, and those outside traditional respectability norms often feel excluded from shaping church life. By intentionally centering the voices of the churched, the dechurched, and the unchurched, this study validates their experiences as important and relevant theological data, consistent with Black and womanist traditions that affirm marginalized voices as "sources of divine wisdom."[11]

[10] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 43–47.
[11] Allen-McLaurin, *A Womanist Theology*, 29-30.

Contributions to Leadership Innovation

Key to this study is the realization that many younger adults disengage not because they reject God, but because they perceive church leadership as unresponsive, inaccessible, or disconnected from their realities.[12] Therefore, leadership itself becomes a central factor in religious disaffection. This study contributes to leadership innovation by identifying practices that are:

- collaborative rather than hierarchical,
- relational rather than performative,
- inclusive rather than exclusionary,
- and rooted in liberation rather than institutional preservation.

Such practices reflect the historic strengths of the Black Church while addressing contemporary needs.

Model for Contextual Ministry

And although not tied to any single city or region, the challenges examined in this study reflect broader national patterns shaped by shifting cultural norms, digital life, economic pressures, evolving understandings of identity, and growing institutional distrust. Ronald Peters argues that effective ministry must address both spiritual formation and the structural forces that shape people's lives.[13] By grounding leadership practices in contextual realities, this study contributes a model that can be adapted across diverse Black Church contexts experiencing similar generational shifts.

---

[12] Alexis Henderson, "The Black Church, the Younger Generation, and the Unchurched," *Journal of Black Religious Thought* (2024).

[13] Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 14–20.

Research Questions

This study is guided by one primary research question and four secondary questions.

Primary Research Question

What leadership practices can help reclaim disaffected Black Millennials and Gen Zers back to the Black Church?

Secondary Research Questions

1. What do disaffected Black Millennials and Gen Zers identify as the primary reasons for disengaging from the Black Church?
2. How do clergy leaders perceive the causes of this generational disengagement?
3. What theological, ecclesial, cultural, and liturgical themes emerge when comparing the perspectives of disaffected adults and church leadership?
4. How can collaborative and cooperative leadership practices cultivate belonging, participation, and spiritual formation among Black adults ages 18–45?

Collectively, these questions intentionally treat the experiences of younger adults as theological and pastoral data—central to understanding the Church's challenges and its path forward.

Theological Framework

The theological framework for this project rests on three interconnected commitments: liberation, belonging, and communal restoration.

Liberation as Theological Mandate

The Black Church historically emerged as a site of liberation, a place where enslaved and oppressed people encountered a God who hears the cries of the marginalized. James Cone asserts that God's presence is most visible in the struggle for freedom and dignity.[14]

[14] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 31.

Liberation must therefore guide any leadership practice intended to reclaim the disaffected. Key to this commitment will be and expanded understanding of liberation that helps the Black Church realize the ways in which it has not been faithful to this in the past.

Belonging as Sacred Practice

Lisa Allen-McLaurin notes that worship in the Black tradition constructs communal righteousness, forming a community where belonging is theological, not incidental.[15] For younger adults who often describe church as judgmental, exclusionary, or unsafe, belonging must become a central expression of pastoral care and leadership. Inherent in this will be a mandate for the Church to create brave spaces. Brave spaces being those places where the disaffected can come as their authentic selves and yet receive the support to grow and be nurtured in the broken places of their lives.

Communal Restoration as Pastoral Responsibility

Communal restoration requires leaders to address the social, emotional, and spiritual wounds of a generation shaped by racial trauma, institutional distrust, and shifting cultural norms. Ronald Peters argues that effective ministry must engage both personal faith and structural realities.[16] Therefore, leadership practices that foster healing, transparency, and shared agency are essential. This is especially true in a digital era where every action taken by spiritual and religious leaders is under scrutiny and the smallest of careless actions or words further damages existing traumas of Church hurt and disappointment.

---

[15] Lisa Allen-McLaurin, *A Womanist Theology of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 22-24.

[16] Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 18–22

Summary, Theological Integration, and Conclusion

Summary of the Ministry Problem and Theological Imperative

My story—marked by instability, longing, resilience, and divine encounter—is not merely autobiographical; it mirrors the larger narrative of the Black Church and the Black community. Just as I sought refuge, dignity, and belonging as a child, generations of Black people sought those same needs within the Black Church. Historically, the Church became a sanctuary where those denied humanity found affirmation, where those crushed by oppression discovered sacred resistance, and where those navigating trauma encountered the sustaining presence of God.[17]

Yet the very institution that nurtured generations is now facing a significant crisis: Black Millennials and Gen Zers are disengaging from the Church at drastically increasing rates. Pew Research documents a steady decline in Christian affiliation among younger African Americans, a trend that mirrors national patterns of religious disaffection.[18] This generational crisis is not simply a matter of attendance; it signals a deeper theological issue. The Black Church was founded on the belief that God stands with the oppressed and that liberation, belonging, and justice are central to Christian identity.[19] When young adults express that they no longer feel safe, included, or spiritually nourished within the Church, their lament becomes a theological indictment, one that calls the Church to examine where it may have drifted from its liberative roots.

---

[17] Gates, *The Black Church*, 52–55.

[18] Pew Research Center, Faith Among Black Americans.

[19] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 27–30.

Statements like "I'm spiritual but not religious," "I don't trust Pastors," or "I don't believe in organized religion" reveal not a loss of faith, but a loss of trust. They reflect what Lisa Allen-McLaurin identifies as the communal disruption that occurs when the Church ceases to function as a site of embodied righteousness, a place where dignity, justice, and acceptance are lived realities.[20] Thus, the ministry problem at the heart of this project is both pastoral and theological: How can the Black Church reclaim its historic mission of liberation, belonging, and communal care in order to reengage Black Millennials and Gen Zers who feel spiritually disconnected, culturally misunderstood, or institutionally unseen? This question grounds the theological imperative of this study. If the Black Church refuses to adapt, it undermines its identity as a liberating institution and risks forfeiting its role as the sacred homeplace that formed so many.

Theological Reflection: Returning to the Roots of Liberation and Community

The path toward reclaiming younger adults requires a theological return—a return to the core identities that sustained the Black Church through centuries of oppression, displacement, and transformation.

Jesus and the Margins

Key to that core identity was an understanding of that the ministry of Jesus was inherently marginal. He centered the poor, the sick, the outcast, the spiritually wounded, and those systemically excluded from religious life. Roger Gench describes early Christian community as "a people formed in the trenches of human suffering," shaped by solidarity with those the world deemed unworthy.[21] This vision resonates with the

[20] Allen-McLaurin, *Womanist Theology*, 22-24.

[21] Roger J. Gench, *Theology from the Trenches: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 12–15.

foundational mission of the Black Church, which emerged among the enslaved, those whose humanity was denied but whose faith proclaimed a God who liberates. Young Black adults who feel unseen or silenced echo the cry of those early communities. Their disengagement calls the Black Church to reclaim a Christology rooted in presence, solidarity, and justice.

Liberation as Identity, Not Preference

According to James Cone, liberation is not a theological theme—it is the essence of Christian identity, particularly within the Black tradition.[22] The Black Church cannot claim fidelity to its heritage if it does not embody liberation for all its members, including individuals whose identities challenge traditional norms around sexuality, gender, mental health, or social class. Millennials and Gen Zers increasingly resist environments that feel rigid, judgmental, or exclusionary. With this understanding, it is vital that as Church leaders, we reframe their resistance as not rebellion, but as a theological plea for a Church to practice what it preaches.

Community as Sacred Healing

The Black Church historically offered communal belonging as a sacred act. Henry Louis Gates describes this as the defining feature of Black ecclesial life, a force that shaped identity, nurtured resilience, and held communities together through terror and triumph.[23] Today, many young adults do not feel that sense of home. They articulate spiritual fatigue, emotional distancing, or fear of judgment. Their disengagement reveals the need for practices that restore belonging, affirm identity, and heal wounds.

---

[22] Cone, *Black Theology*, xii.
[23] Gates, *The Black Church*, 105-108.

Relevance, Authenticity, and Truth-Telling

Because research overwhelmingly yields that the Disaffected seek authenticity, we must realize that they are not opposed to faith; they are opposed to performance. They are not allergic to tradition; they are allergic to hypocrisy. They long for communities where justice is lived, where trauma is acknowledged, where mental health is addressed, and where spiritual practices speak to the realities of life. Ronald Peters emphasizes that ministry must engage the structural realities that shape people's daily lived experience—economic hardship, policing, racism, mental health, and social fragmentation.[24] In other words, authenticity requires truth-telling: a willingness to name suffering and offer hope grounded in real life.

Transition to Chapter 1: Setting the Foundation

This chapter has established:

- My personal and theological grounding
- The historical and contemporary tensions shaping the Black Church
- The ministry problem centered on Black adults ages 18–45
- The purpose, significance, and theological commitments of this study
- The research questions guiding the project

Together, these elements reveal a Black Church standing at a crossroads—caught between a liberative past and a rapidly changing present. As we move forward, we will build upon this foundation by exploring:

- the historical emergence of the Black Church,
- its theological identity,
- its cultural and communal purpose,
- and its sociopolitical role.

[24] Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 14–20.

These themes form the foundation for understanding both the crisis of decline and the possibilities for renewal.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE BLACK CHURCH

Narrative Bridge, Historical Nature, and Identity

My personal journey into the Black Church is inseparable from the larger historical story of Black people in the United States, one that stretches across centuries of Black faith, communal struggle, cultural formation, and theological imagination. The belonging I discovered walking into Greater Vineville Baptist Church echoed the centuries-long pattern of Black communities seeking refuge, meaning, and dignity through faith. The Black Church was there, holding the pain, hope, and determination of our people. Their stories, like mine, are marked by displacement, resilience, longing, and the persistent hope that while weeping endured for the night, joy would come in the morning.

For generations, the Black Church was where people encountered a God who understood their pain, affirmed their humanity, and empowered them to endure. The same sense of belonging that embraced me at nine years old had been embracing Black hearts long before my birth. To understand why the Black Church mattered then—and why it must be reclaimed today—we must revisit the historical roots that formed it. The Black Church did not emerge by accident or convenience. It was born of necessity, shaped through suffering, sustained by resistance, and centered on liberation. Only through understanding this history can the contemporary crisis facing the Black Church not only be understood – but mitigated. And without the clarity of its origins, the work of reclaiming disaffected generations cannot proceed with integrity.

The Historical Nature of the Black Church

It is important to realize that the Black Church did not begin as an institution, but as a refuge. In fact, the earliest expressions of the Black Church did not take place in sanctuaries, rather they took shape within the Invisible Institution, secret gatherings where enslaved Africans forged a faith that rejected the theological justifications of slavery. In hidden brush harbors and forest clearings, they prayed, lamented, interpreted Scripture, and sang with a depth born of suffering. Henry Louis Gates describes these gatherings as "counterworlds of spiritual resistance," where enslaved Africans crafted a theology of liberation rooted in the biblical witness.[25]

This early tradition fused African spiritual memory with narratives of deliverance, affirming that God not only saw Black suffering but acted decisively on behalf of the oppressed. Their faith emerged not as an acceptance of bondage, but as a direct confrontation against it. Stories of Moses, the prophets, and the crucified Christ became theological anchors in the midst of hardships. In whispered songs and encoded prayers, enslaved Africans developed a shared belief that God was on the side of the oppressed, a theological conviction that would later become the backbone of Black Church identity. James Cone later formalized this conviction, arguing that "the Black Church was born in the crucible of suffering, where God's liberating presence became the source of hope."[26]

In this Invisible Institution, faith was embodied rather than systematized. Christianity as practiced by enslaved Africans fused African cosmologies, rhythmic spirituality, communal ethics, and biblical interpretation that centered liberation. This

[25] Gates, *The Black Church*, 17–21.
[26] Cone, *Black Theology*, 31.

dynamic blend laid the foundation for what Tony Evans identifies as "the spiritual genius of a people who refused to surrender their humanity."[27]

In fact, from its inception, the Black Church emerged as a theological response to oppression. Enslaved Africans encountered a version of Christianity that was weaponized to enforce obedience, yet they carved out space to re-read the biblical narrative in light of their own suffering. Stories of the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus became not stories of passive salvation but of *active deliverance*. As Evans explains, "enslaved believers saw in Scripture a God who enters history to break chains, not reinforce them."[28] This historical reinterpretation was not accidental. It was survival and dignity rooted in a refusal to allow slavery or her children, segregation and discrimination, to define human worth.

This spirit of resistance would carry the Black Church through slavery and beyond. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Black people formed independent congregations in response to segregation, discrimination, and spiritual exclusion within white churches. Rather than be relegated to back door entrances and balcony seating, their experiences led to the formation of independent Black congregations with leaders like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who founded the Free African Society in 1787 to claim religious freedom and community autonomy.[29] Out of these movements emerged the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and other denominational traditions that gave institutional shape to Black Christian expression. But this was not merely institutional reshaping, it was a declaration of spiritual agency.

Independent Black churches functioned as:

---

[27] Evans, *Survey of the Black Church*, 9–12.
[28] Evans, *Survey of the Black Church*, 14.
[29] Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833), 45.

- Worshiping communities
- Educational centers
- Centers of abolitionist strategy
- Communal organizing hubs
- Spaces for literacy, leadership, and cultural formation

Gates notes that the emergence of these churches created the first religious institutions fully controlled by African Americans—spaces where Black theology, Black liturgy, and Black community life could develop without white surveillance or domination.[30]

Reconstruction and Institutional Expansion

Following emancipation, the Black Church became the most significant institution in Black life across the South. With little to no access to government resources, formerly enslaved families turned to the Church for:

- Education
- Mutual aid
- Medical help
- Job assistance
- Political organization
- Cultural celebration
- Spiritual grounding

Henry Louis Gates notes that during Reconstruction and after, the Black Church was "the only institution African Americans fully controlled," making it the central force in shaping communal identity.[31] This is why the Black Church was not simply a religious body; it was a social, political, educational, and cultural institution that helped Black communities navigate a hostile world. The Black Church was the in fact, the epicenter of Black communal life.

[30] Gates, *The Black Church*, 48.
[31] Gates, *The Black Church*, 63.

Identity of the Black Church

Historical Identity

The term "Black Church" however, is misleading as it suggests a homogeneity that belies the diversity existing within the theology, ecclesiology and liturgical practices of the various institutions of which it is comprised. Ask any number of scholars and one is likely to get as many answers in response to the question, "What is the Black Church?" With a few exceptions, the definition of the Black Church has traditionally been limited to serving as a reference point for the seven historically Black denominations:

- African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)
- African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion)
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME)
- Church of God in Christ (COGIC)
- National Baptist Convention (NBC)
- National Baptist Convention of America International (NBCA)
- Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC).[32]

Raphael Warnock suggest that this definition is too narrow, and that any definition of the Black Church must be broad enough to account for the current realities of Christianity for Blacks that includes the development of independent black theological reflections. He notes that "the precise definition of the black church, and whether the complex and heterogenous character of the black ecclesial groupings in the North American context even allow for such a designation, has been contested terrain."[33] Like Warnock, I agree that this definition is too narrow and warrants a need to excavate exactly what is meant by "Black Church" in this study.

---

[32] Gates, *The Black Church*, 8.

[33] Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*, (New York, NY: New York University, 2014), 7-9.

Contemporary Conceptions of the Church

Sociologist Jason E. Shelton points out that several scholars define the Black Church as "a Christian congregation that is primarily composed of African American believers and is rooted in African American cultural values, rituals, practices, and norms."[34] In his own working definition of the Black Church however, Shelton notes two identifying factors that must be present to a Black Church: (1) the congregation has to be at least 80 percent African American, and (2) the congregation must have a Black Senior Pastor.[35] This definition, while accounting for the composition and leadership within the Black Church, fails to capture richness of the culture that constitutes the Black Church nor the theological orientations that reflect Black beliefs and practices.

Warnock defines the Black Church as the various ecclesial groups of Black Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation, that are "imbued with the memory of a suffering Jesus and informed by the legacy of slavery and segregation in America."[36] For Warnock, the intersectionality of being Black and Christian in America with racism as the binding glue, is paramount for understanding what defines the Black Church.

Tony Evans, in *A Survey of the Black Church in* America, offers an understanding of the Black Church that supports this point. He notes that the Black Church is the result of five factors: enslaved Blacks search for meaning, evangelization, a natural integration of their religious foundations, the Bible, and the Black preacher. While he does not offer a single and panoptic definition for the Black Church, Evans's reflection on these factors

---

[34] Jason E. Shelton, *The Contemporary Black Church: The New Dynamics of African American Religion,* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2024), 32.

[35] Jason E. Shelton, *The Contemporary Black Church*, 32-33.

[36] Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind*, 9.

offers valuable insight into the nature and character of the Black Church as he sees it. Summarizing his reflections would present the Black Church, at least partially, as a community of Christians informed by an African worldview where they see themselves as relatives looking to God in search of freedom, meaning, hope and help.[37]

A New Identity for the Contemporary World

Any attempt to define the Black Church reveals how inextricably connected such an undertaking is with identity. Executed with proper precision, a definition of the Black Church takes on an identity that claims the pain and power of our past. Alternately, it also presents the risk of reductionism. It must be understood that the Black Church is more than an institution that emerged from slavery or a vehicle for the Civil Rights Movement. Such an understanding finds little relevance to younger Generations who view events from 60 years ago as ancient history. Therefore, any claimed identity for the. Black Church must account for the current reality of Black people while anchoring the Black Church in a tradition and worldview that seeks to understand God in a broader, richer, and perhaps most importantly, updatable context.

Since the Black Church is therefore not monolithic and no consensus of its meaning exists, it is both appropriate and important to offer what exactly is meant when we refer to the "Black Church" in this project. Drawing from my lived experiences, pastoral encounters, academic formation, and analysis of Black Church scholarship, I define the contemporary Black Church as:

A composite of various Christian communities who are predominantly Black in their membership, have Black leadership and hold true to values, liturgical practices, and

[37]Evans, *Survey of the Black Church,* 94-97.

theologies that are informed by an African American worldview of historical and contemporary events and who are imbued with a commitment to the promises of an empowering Jesus.

This definition intentionally resists monolithic or static representations of the Black Church and acknowledges the wide diversity that exists across denominational traditions, worship expressions, socioeconomic contexts, theological orientations, and regional settings. While these communities are not uniform in belief or practice, they are historically grounded in shared experiences of racialized oppression, communal struggle, and spiritual resilience. Within this tradition, salvation has historically been understood as a communal and liberative reality concerned with the restoration of dignity, belonging, and shared life, rather than as an individualistic piety focused solely on personal morality or private spiritual fulfillment. This theological orientation is powerfully articulated by Howard Thurman, who understood salvation as inseparable from the dignity, freedom, and wholeness of oppressed communities, insisting that the gospel must speak to the lived realities of those whose humanity has been systematically denied.[38]

In this light, the Black Church has functioned not only as a site of personal spiritual formation, but as a communal space for healing, moral imagination, and collective survival. This project therefore approaches the Black Church as a living and adaptive tradition whose theological resources—particularly its emphasis on communal salvation, embodied faith, and liberative hope—remain vital for engaging contemporary patterns of disengagement among younger generations.

---

[38] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11–14.

Culture, Community, and Mission

Core to the identity of the Black Church is worship. Worship traditions also carried the memory of earlier forms of spiritual resistance. Call and response, embodied praise, ring shouts, spirituals, and testimony service all served as cultural continuity from the Invisible Institution. Lisa Allen-McLaurin notes that these elements were more than emotional expression, rather they were "ritual acts of survival that maintained communal identity across generations." Black worship as a space of "communal righteousness," where identity, memory, music, and ritual create belonging.[39] These practices encoded a narrative: *We are a people who survived. We are a people who endured. God was with us.*

Yet, the contemporary Black Church must also engage present-day challenges of digital culture, generational fragmentation, mental health, identity formation, and new forms of injustice. This, while remaining grounded in its liberative heritage.[40] The definition laid out here does not disregard the diversity within the Black Church; rather, it acknowledges it. It establishes the identity of the Black Church not only as a historic institution, but as a living body called to evolve alongside the people it serves. Further, it centers the common mission that binds Black congregations despite denominational differences: the call to cultivate liberation, belonging, justice, and hope for Black people in every generation.

[39] Allen-McLaurin, *Womanist Theology of Worship*, 22-29
[40] Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 14–20.

The Theological Nature of the Black Church

Theology Born in Oppression

Just as the Black Church has a historical story, it also has a theological soul. Its history explains *what happened*; its theology explains *why it matters*. Part of what distinguishes the Black Church from other Christian traditions is that its theology was never merely a doctrinal system developed in the academy. It was a theology born in fields, whispered in hush arbors, shouted in praise houses, cried in laments, and embodied in rituals that preserved dignity when the wider world denied it. Its first theologians were the enslaved, the exploited, and the unprotected. The experience of bondage made salvation urgent, justice non-negotiable, and hope a spiritual necessity, it was there that God met them.

From its inception, the theological nature of the Black Church has always been rooted in its liberative identity. From its earliest expressions in the Invisible Institution, Black faith was forged as a response to the denial of Black humanity. Enslaved Africans learned quickly that the God of Scripture was not the God of the plantation, and they refused to worship a Christ who blessed oppression. Instead, they encountered the God who delivered Israel from bondage and raised Jesus from the dead, a God who stood with the suffering and demanded justice in the face of inequity.

This theological orientation was not accidental. It emerged from a deliberate reading of Scripture in which enslaved believers identified not only with the Israelites under Pharaoh, but also the Hebrew midwives, the prophets who confronted unjust kings, and Jesus who suffered under imperial violence. While white slaveholding Christianity justified bondage through selective readings of Pauline texts, the enslaved saw

themselves in the Exodus story, an interpretive move that re-centered liberation as the heart of the Gospel.[41] Cone argues that this liberative impulse is not merely one theme among others; it is the very essence of the Black Church's theological vision.[42] The God that the enslaved Africans trusted was not a distant deity, but an active presence, intimately aware of their suffering and committed to their liberation. This theological conviction continues to shape the Black Church's understanding of salvation as encompassing both the spiritual and material dimensions of Black life.

Theology of Presence

Regarding embodied theology, Lisa Allen-McLaurin reminds us that Black worship is characterized by a "communal righteousness," where theology is expressed not only through doctrine but through embodied practices such as music, testimony, prayer, and call-and-response.[43] This embodied theology affirms that faith is not merely believed, it is lived, sung, danced, proclaimed, and importantly, shared. It is a corporate experience that speaks to the historical and contemporary realities of Black existence.

Theology for the Black Church was not primarily a set of propositions; it was a testimony of survival. When people gathered to worship, they were asserting that God had not abandoned them—despite the horrors of enslavement, lynching, segregation, and ongoing racial violence. This theology of presence can be seen in:

- **Call-and-response** affirmations that "God will make a way"
- **Testimony services** where survival is framed as divine intervention
- **Preaching moments** where suffering is interpreted through the lens of divine solidarity
- **Communal prayer** that names trauma and seeks deliverance

---

[41] Gates, *The Black Church*, 54–56.
[42] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.
[43] Allen-McLaurin, *A Womanist Theology of Worship*, 22–24.

The core conviction beneath these practices is that *God does not distance Godself from Black suffering, but dwells in it.* This is why traditional Black preaching often emphasizes that "God is a very present help in the time of trouble," not a theoretical one, but an active, intervening, sustaining force. The theological nature of the contemporary Black Church remains grounded in these same commitments.

As previously noted, the Black Church's identity is forged at the intersection of African American spiritual traditions, liberation theology, communal belonging, and cultural memory. Its theology, whether expressed through preaching, worship, pastoral care, or social engagement, remains centered on the holistic flourishing of Black people in a world that continues to diminish Black lives. It is this heritage that uniquely positions the Black Church to respond meaningfully to the crisis of disengagement among the Disaffected. It offers resources of hope, identity, and meaning that resonate powerfully with younger generations who long for communities where justice, authenticity, and belonging are non-negotiable.

The Cultural and Communal Purpose of the Black Church

As noted, since its inception, the Black Church has served as the cultural and communal center of Black life. Long before there were Black-owned schools, banks, insurance companies, or civic organizations, the Church functioned as the primary institution through which Black people organized their social, cultural, and communal existence. As Henry Louis Gates notes, the Church was the one place where Black people could fully claim agency, leadership, creativity, and voice.[44]

[44] Gates, *The Black Church*, 63.

The Black Church as Cultural Memory

During an era when enslaved Africans were prohibited from reading, writing, or maintaining connection to their heritage, the nascent church communities became both containers and creators of African cultural identity. These early religious gatherings forged a spiritual and communal identity distinct from the dominant culture, blending African cosmologies, expressive spirituality, and biblical hope into a new sacred form.[45] Through their music, preaching, oral tradition, ritual, and storytelling, the Black Church found ways to preserve cultural forms carried from Africa. Elements like spirituals, gospel music, the ring shout and the call-and-response worship become more than artistic expressions; they become vehicles of survival, memory, and hope. They allow Black communities to affirm their humanity in the face of oppression and to claim joy even when joy seemed unattainable.

The Black Church as Communal Formation

Just as the Black Church preserved cultural memory, it also served as a communal anchor, a place where identity was shaped, dignity formed, and collective agency nurtured. Allen-McLaurin posits that worship in the Black tradition is inherently communal because it "constructs righteousness together" through shared performance, testimony, and liturgy.[46] The Black Church is not a space where individuals gather to encounter God separately, rather it is a space where a *people* encounter God together. As a communal gathering spot, it was the place where Black people found belonging, affirmation, and dignity that they were denied elsewhere. Even when society labeled

[45] Gates, *The Black Church*, 44–46
[46] Allen-McLaurin, *Womanist Theology of Worship*, 22–23.

Blacks as inferior, criminal, or unworthy, the Church recognized them as "brother," "sister," "mother," and "father." The Black Church was where individuals discovered identity and purpose through relationships forged in worship and service.

Communal Support and Mutual Aid

Historically, the Black Church organized burial societies, mutual aid funds, housing support, educational programs, and social networks long before such systems were available to Black communities. Because many Black families lacked access to institutional infrastructure, the Church stepped in as a surrogate, meeting both practical and emotional needs. This communal ethic remains foundational to the Church's purpose and shapes its ongoing responsibility to Black communities today.

The Church is equipped to fill this cultural-communal need because of its ability to embody the emotional language of a people's struggle. In spirituals, testimonies, and preaching, the Black Church has long provided sacred space for lament, hope, joy, anger, mourning, and resilience. This emotional dimension has always been inseparable from the Black Church's purpose because the Church taught the community how to "hold sorrow and hope together" in faith.[47]

Cultural Identity Formation for a New Generation

Yet this cultural-communal purpose is precisely what many disaffected Black adults say they no longer experience. They describe:

- performative rather than relational community,
- judgment rather than acceptance,
- nostalgia rather than authenticity,
- programs rather than connection.

[47] Evans, *Survey of the Black Church*, 2024, 57

This highlights that the crisis, then, is not simply doctrinal or sociological — it is communal. Many do not feel "at home" in the Church anymore, suggesting a profound disconnect between the Church's purpose and its current practices.

This raises a critical ministry question: How can the Black Church reclaim its identity as a cultural and communal homeplace for those who now feel spiritually orphaned?

The Sociopolitical Purpose of the Black Church

While the cultural-communal purpose reveals how the Church functions as a home, the sociopolitical purpose explains how it has historically empowered a people to survive and resist oppression. The Black Church is not merely a religious institution, but also a sociopolitical agent born out of Black resistance. Beyond its theological and cultural significance, it has long occupied a central role in the sociopolitical life of Black communities. From the earliest days of enslavement through emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and into the present, the Church has served as both a refuge and a base of organized resistance. It has continually positioned itself as a moral voice against injustice and as a catalyst for social transformation.

In fact, the Black Church is an "unbroken lineage of resistance," linking the Invisible Institution to the organized activism of later generations.[48] In the tradition of the Black Church, political resistance was not separate from spiritual identity, instead, it was an expression of it. The enslaved saw their struggle for freedom as inherently theological, grounded in the biblical narrative of God delivering the oppressed (Exodus 3:7–8). This

[48] Gates, *The Black Church*, 95–99

conviction continued into the post-slavery era, shaping how the Church responded to racial violence, segregation, and systemic inequality.

The Black Church from the Invisible Institution forward represented a counternarrative to White supremacist structures. In fact, Black faith has always been a site of resistance against cultural narratives that devalue Black lives.[49] The Church was not only resisting the sin of racism but proclaiming a God who refuses to sanction oppression.

The Black Church and Social Transformation

From Reconstruction to Civil Rights, the Black Church stood at the center of Black sociopolitical life. As noted earlier, it provided not only spiritual leadership, but civic education, political mobilization, and community strategy. Pastors were often community organizers, political strategists, educators, and spokespersons for collective suffering. Further, the Church was the vehicle for social movements by teaching literacy and political consciousness, organizing boycotts and marches, cultivating leaders such as King, Abernathy, and Baker, and advocating for justice in courts and legislatures.

In many Black towns and rural areas, the Church was the first, and sometimes only, place where formerly enslaved people practiced democracy, held meetings, learned to read, or participated in collective decision-making. This legacy carried forward into the 20th century. Civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Wyatt Tee Walker, and others emerged from Black pulpits. Their activism grew out of an understanding that faith demanded confrontation with injustice and that spiritual liberation required social liberation. As C. Anthony Hunt notes, the Civil Rights

[49] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 30–31.

Movement was both a theological and political project rooted in a Christian vision of the Beloved Community.[50]

Political Agency and Collective Advocacy

Throughout history, the Black Church has also served as a political educator and advocate. Churches hosted town halls, voter registration drives, and citizenship classes. They organized campaigns against lynching, segregated schooling, discriminatory labor practices, and voter suppression. Kelly Brown Douglas argues that this sociopolitical activism emerges naturally from a theological vision that treats Black humanity as sacred and God-given.[51] When the Church proclaims liberation, it proclaims dignity—and dignity demands justice.

James Cone reframed the sociopolitical purpose of the Black Church theologically as God is always on the side of the oppressed, and any theology that does not liberate is not Christian theology.[52] Clear in Cone's thoughts is that Black Christian faith cannot be separated from political struggle. To proclaim Christ in the Black Church is to proclaim liberation.

The Black Church in Contemporary Sociopolitical Tension

Sociopolitical Concerns and Relevance

In contemporary contexts, Black Millennials and Gen Zers continue to show deep concern for justice, equity, policing, mass incarceration, and economic disparity. Many identify justice work as essential to their spirituality, even when they struggle to connect with institutional religion. This trend aligns with research showing that young adults

---

[50] Hunt, *I've Seen the Promised Land*, 18–21
[51] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 61–65
[52] Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, xii

often leave churches not because they are politically disengaged, but because they feel churches are not sufficiently engaged in justice work.[53] They question whether the Church still speaks prophetically, whether it challenges injustice, whether it resists oppressive structures, or whether it has become perpetuators of the evils it once fought. Some perceive the Church as having lost its public voice, while others believe it focuses inward, on institutional survival rather than societal transformation.

Peters warns that churches cannot remain socio-politically relevant if they fail to address the systemic realities shaping its members' lives, such as poverty, policing, inequity, gentrification, and trauma.[54] While Peters here is not referring specifically the Black Church, the warning holds true, nonetheless. For the Disaffected, a generation formed by Black Lives Matter, mass incarceration, and ongoing racialized violence, a Church without a sociopolitical witness feels incomplete at best.

Challenges to Sociopolitical Engagement

Despite its historic role, many Black churches now face internal tensions that can hinder sociopolitical relevance and subsequently, engagement. These include:

- Institutional fatigue
- A decline in community-oriented programming
- Leadership models that do not empower younger adults
- The role of women in ministry
- Internal conflict around LGBTQ+ inclusion
- The pull of digital activism outside the Church

[53] Kate Shellnutt, "Black Millennials and Gen Z Becoming More Cynical Toward Christian Identity," *Christianity Today*, April 15, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/04/black-gen-z-millennial-christian-church-trends-barna/

[54] Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 18–20.

As a result, some Black Millennials and Gen Zers question whether the Church still possesses the moral authority, courage, or imagination necessary for sociopolitical leadership. In response to this doubt, it is vital that the contemporary Black Church remain rooted in a mission to cultivate faith, justice, dignity, and holistic flourishing for Black people in an ever-changing world. This mission calls the Church not simply to honor its past, but to discern its future and to speak prophetically to the issues that matter most to younger generations.

A Necessary Reorientation

To fulfill its sociopolitical purpose today, the Black Church must reorient itself toward:

- Empowering younger voices
- Engaging digital justice movements
- Addressing mental and emotional well-being
- Advocating for equity in housing, education, and employment
- Confronting systems of mass incarceration and racial violence
- Expanding its theological imagination to include the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons, women, and other marginalized identities
- Reclaiming its historic posture of prophetic leadership

This reorientation does not require abandoning it rich heritage, it requires returning to the Black Church's roots as a liberating institution whose spirituality is inseparable from its public witness. This raises another important ministry questions: How can the Black Church recover a justice-centered witness that speaks to contemporary Black suffering and Black hope?

Embedded in this ministry question is a recognition that when the Church's sociopolitical voice weakens, so does its moral credibility. And when its credibility diminishes, younger Black adults seek justice work outside the Church, in activism,

nonprofits, or digital movements. This trend is not a rejection of faith, but a search for a faith that still struggles, still advocates, still speaks.

Continuities and Tensions in the Life of the Black Church

The Black Church has never existed as a static institution. It has always lived at the intersection of continuity and tension, anchored in its historical identity while navigating the shifting realities of Black life. These continuities and tensions shape both its enduring strength and its contemporary challenges. Understanding them is essential for grasping why the Disaffected remain spiritually hungry yet institutionally distant.

Continuities of Identity, Purpose, and Practice

Across its long history, several defining features of the Black Church have remained remarkably consistent. (1) **The Liberative Identity of the Black Church**: From the Invisible Institution through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church has proclaimed a God who stands with the oppressed. (2) **Worship as Communal and Embodied Theology:** Worship remains a defining feature of Black Christian life. (**3) Communal Care and Mutual Support:** Historically, the Black Church has served as a communal support system—providing spiritual formation, social services, and emotional care. Even today, many Black people still turn to the Church for support during crises, celebrations, transitions, and rites of passage. (**4) Commitment to Justice and Social Witness:** The sociopolitical role of the Black Church continues to be a defining feature of its public witness. These continuities affirm that the Black Church remains rooted in a rich history of liberation, community, and prophetic leadership, an identity that has not been lost, even as new tensions emerge.

Tensions Confronting the Contemporary Black Church

Yet, while the Black Church continues to embody its historic strengths, it also faces internal tensions that shape the experience of Black adults ages 18–45.

Tradition vs. Innovation

One of the major tensions lies between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. Many Black churches remain anchored in structures and practices shaped by mid-20th-century models of worship, leadership, and community life. Yet younger generations formed in a digital, global, and rapidly changing world often seek worship experiences and leadership practices that reflect contemporary realities. It is evident—especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic—how the digital age has reshaped the way people connect, learn, and build community. Churches resistant to hybrid ministry models often lose relevance among younger adults for whom digital life is not auxiliary but central. When churches resist adaptation, younger adults frequently interpret this as rigidity rather than faithfulness.

Respectability Politics vs. Liberative Theology

Historically, the Black Church served as a beacon of liberation. Yet in some contexts, elements of respectability politics, doctrinal rigidity, or moral gatekeeping have overshadowed its liberative identity. Douglas argues that such dynamics can silence marginalized voices and reinforce oppressive norms under the guise of spiritual authority.[55] This tension is particularly acute for Black adults navigating issues of sexuality, identity, mental health, and nontraditional life paths.

[55] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 43–47.

Communal Belonging vs. Social Fragmentation

Although the Black Church once served as the locus of the Black community, the rise of digital social networks, economic migration, and shifting social patterns has disrupted traditional pathways of belonging. Younger adults now form community in multiple spaces—online, in activist circles, through shared interests—often outside the Church. When churches fail to understand and faithfully respond to these shifting norms, they risk alienating young people who struggle to find points of parity.

Prophetic Witness vs. Institutional Maintenance

Another tension emerges between the Church's prophetic calling and the pressures of institutional survival. Declining attendance and financial instability can push congregations toward preservation rather than mission. This institutional anxiety can weaken the Church's public witness and alienate younger adults who long for justice-oriented spiritual communities.[56]

Intergenerational Gaps

Patterns of communication, leadership expectations, theological vocabulary, and cultural references often differ dramatically across generations. When older adults misunderstand or dismiss the concerns of younger adults, intergenerational trust erodes. This distrust becomes a significant barrier to engagement for those ages 18–45.

Navigating Continuities and Tensions: A Path Forward

At the core of these tensions lies a fundamental gap between the Black Church as it has been and the Black Church as it must become. This gap does not signal failure, but it does signal transition. It mirrors the transitional periods the Black Church has faced

[56] Shellnutt, "Black Millennials and Gen Z".

before: Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights era, the crack epidemic, and now the digital/post-pandemic age. Each historical inflection required reorientation, and the present moment is no different. Even as the contemporary Black Church faces the challenge of holding together its historic identity and its evolving mission, the continuities of liberation, community, worship, and justice remain central to its calling. Yet the tensions, especially those related to identity, inclusion, leadership, belonging, and cultural relevance, demand intentional reflection and transformation.

The definition of the contemporary Black Church I articulated earlier provides a theological and ecclesial framework for navigating these tensions. It describes the Church as holding true to values, liturgical practices, and theologies that are informed by an African American worldview of historical and contemporary events and who are imbued with a commitment to the promises of an empowering Jesus. Key in this definition is a commitment to the promises of an empowering Jesus. It is an invitation for the Black Church to return to its liberative roots while embodying adaptive, justice-oriented, communal practices that speak meaningfully to Black adults ages 18–45, one that elevates the life of Jesus as a model:

- An invitation to extend grace to others: John 8:7
- An invitation to help those who are in need: Luke 10:25-37
- An invitation to not judge others: Matthew 7:3-5
- An invitation to care for the helpless: Matthew 25:31-46
- An invitation to create and share space with those shunned by society: Matthew 22:1-8

The Black Church then is being invited, perhaps compelled, to challenge the status quo of sociopolitical oppression and norms and enter a new season of theological courage, pastoral imagination, and institutional humility.

Summary and Transition to Chapter 2

Thematically, this chapter traced the historical, theological, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions that have shaped the Black Church from its origins to the present. Through a light but intentional revision, the narrative holds together the depth of its past and the urgency of its future. The Black Church's development from the Invisible Institution to a diverse expression of denominations reveals its enduring role as a site of liberation, identity, community formation, and prophetic action.

The historical overview demonstrated that the Black Church was never simply a religious institution; it was, and continues to be, a sanctuary of dignity, resistance, and cultural continuity. Whether in brush harbors, independent congregations, Reconstruction-era organizing, or civil rights mobilization, Black faith communities have asserted their God-given humanity against systems intent on denying it. As such, the theological nature of the Black Church remains grounded in a liberative understanding of God. This theological identity is embodied not only through doctrinal statements but through lived practices of worship, community, music, prayer, and testimony, expressions that make Black theology an embodied experience.

In its cultural and communal nature, the Black Church has served as a homeplace of belonging—a space where African American identity, memory, ritual, and creativity have been preserved and passed down across generations. It held our stories when no other institution would. It shaped our values, our social imagination, and our communal ethos. Socio-politically, the Black Church has long been the epicenter of Black advocacy and collective action.

Yet, alongside these continuities, the Black Church has faced substantial tensions. These include the challenges of tradition versus innovation, respectability politics versus liberative theology, communal belonging versus social fragmentation, prophetic witness versus institutional maintenance, and generational gaps that complicate leadership and participation. Such tensions influence how Black Millennials and Gen Zers interpret the relevance and trustworthiness of the Church today.

To navigate these tensions, this chapter affirmed a definition that will guide the remainder of the dissertation:

> "The Black Church is a composite of various Christian communities who are predominantly Black in their membership, have Black leadership and hold true to values, liturgical practices, and theologies that are informed by an African American worldview of historical and contemporary events and who are imbued with a commitment to the promises of an empowering Jesus."

This definition sits at the intersection of history, theology, culture, and mission. It captures both the essence and the aspiration of the Black Church: a living, evolving, spiritually grounded institution shaped by an African American worldview and animated by the liberating ministry of Jesus.

With this foundation established, Chapter 3 will examine the historical and contemporary challenges that shape the Black Church's life in the twenty-first century. This includes:

- demographic and cultural shifts,
- changing patterns of religious participation among Black adults ages 18–45,
- societal pressures impacting the Church's influence,
- internal tensions within Black congregations,
- and the complex interplay of identity, belonging, and community in modern contexts.

In Chapter 2 we will bring together historical scholarship, theological analysis, and empirical data, including survey findings and focus group discussions to illuminate

the factors contributing to Black Church decline and the opportunities for renewal. It marks the transition from understanding what the Black Church is to diagnosing what the Black Church is facing.

CHAPTER TWO

CHALLENGES SHAPING THE CHURCH

The Black Church as a Sociotheological Institution

The Black Church has always functioned as a sociotheological institution shaped by struggle, spiritual imagination, and communal resilience. With its earliest forms emerging against the backdrop of enslavement, African-descended people created sacred spaces that affirmed the humanity that the broader society denied. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that these early ecclesial expressions formed a religious culture defined not only by survival but by theological resistance—a refusal to relinquish dignity in the face of dehumanization.[57] This dual identity, spiritual and social, continues to frame the Black Church's purpose in the twenty-first century.

Recent theological studies argue that the Black Church cannot be understood merely as a religious institution; it is a moral ecosystem formed at the intersection of memory, trauma, and hope. Eboni Marshall Turman describes this identity as a "collective body in motion," an institution that embodies both the weight of Black suffering and the creativity of Black faith.[58] Such a framing highlights the Church's historical vocation—to hold together the spiritual yearnings of a people and the material realities shaping their lives.

As a result, the Black Church's sociotheological identity became particularly visible during the Civil Rights era, when sermons, songs, and sanctuaries fueled a

[57] Stacey Floyd-Thomas, "Embodied Resistance and the Shape of Black Religious Life," *Journal of Africana Religions* 9, no. 3 (2021): 245–260.

[58] Eboni Marshall Turman, *Black Womanist Ethics and the Disruptive Power of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

collective movement toward justice. Contemporary scholars reinterpret this history not simply as an era of political activism but as a moment of theological innovation. They argue that the Black Church developed a distinct practical theology that linked Christian discipleship with public witness, forming a tradition in which liberation and faithfulness were inseparable.[59] This understanding remains foundational even as new generations grapple with a world that looks markedly different from the one their elders navigated.

Yet the Black Church has never been monolithic. Its congregations embody a wide range of denominational traditions, socioeconomic contexts, and theological commitments. Faith communities vary from storefront churches to historic urban congregations, from megachurches to hybrid digital ministries. Recent research emphasizes that the Church's diversity is one of its strengths, producing multiple expressions of Black faith that respond to the differing realities of Black life in America.[60] This internal plurality reflects its historical adaptability—a characteristic that has allowed the Church to survive across centuries of changing social landscapes.

At the same time, the Black Church remains a repository of collective memory. Scholars note that Black congregations carry the stories of migration, protest, resilience, and reinvention that have shaped African American identity across generations.[61] This memory allows the Church to function as a moral archive, preserving traditions that anchor communal life even as cultural norms shift. Sanctuaries become sites where the

---

[59] Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind*, 1-10, 11-35, 75-115.

[60] Kendra Hotz and Caryn Riswold, "Black Religious Diversity and the Formation of Contemporary Faith Communities," *Practical Matters Journal* 13 (2020): 1–22.

[61] Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories That Define Us* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

past and present meet—where testimonies of struggle, songs of deliverance, and rituals of belonging form a shared narrative of hope.

This sociotheological nature of the Black Church emerges from the interplay between sacred identity and social responsibility. As such, the Church gathers not only for worship but for formation, community, healing, and the shaping of moral imagination. It functions as a spiritual home where individuals encounter God and as a communal space where they collectively confront the realities of racial injustice, economic inequality, and existential uncertainty. This dual vocation has always been central to Black religious life.

However, twenty-first century realities have intensified the challenges facing this historic institution. The forces of digital transformation, cultural fragmentation, and generational disengagement place unprecedented pressure on the Church's identity and mission. Younger adults inhabit a social world that is both connected and isolated, spiritually curious yet institutionally cautious. It is in this environment that the Black Church must renegotiate its sociotheological role without relinquishing its moral and spiritual core.

Post–Civil Rights Shifts and Communal Fragmentation

The period following the Civil Rights Movement ushered in social transformations that reshaped Black religious life in profound ways. While legislative victories expanded access to housing, education, and civic participation, these gains also accelerated shifts within the internal life of the Black community. By the early twenty-first century, the combined forces of suburban migration, economic stratification, shifting

cultural values, and later the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reconfigured how many Blacks engaged congregational life.

Economic Stratification and Diverging Realities

While many African Americans gained access to middle-class stability, others faced deepening economic precarity. Inherent within these economic shifts is the church's capacity to cultivate genuine belonging. Data from the late 2010s and early 2020s show widening wealth gaps within the Black community, creating congregations where professionals, service workers, and unemployed individuals worship side by side.[62] This stratification consequently fractured the communal life that once defined the Black Church, creating environments where some experienced a diminished sense of connection and belonging. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this divide, exposing structural inequalities that produced disproportionate economic and health-related impacts in Black communities.[63]

Cultural Shifts, Digital Identity, and Generational Divergence

Technological advances have also played a role in the fragmentation of community within the Black Church. Younger generations increasingly form identity through digital culture, global media, and evolving expressions of Blackness. Studies reveal that Millennials and Gen Z often prioritize spiritual exploration, authenticity, and justice-driven engagement over institutional loyalty.[64] During the pandemic, cultural

---

[62] Andre M. Perry and Darrick Hamilton, *Know Your Price* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

[63] Rashawn Ray and William Darity Jr., "Race, COVID-19, and the Future of Black Communities," *Du Bois Review* 18, no. 2 (2021): 1–23.

[64] Kiana Cox, "Black Millennials and Faith in the Twenty-First Century," Pew Research Center, 2018.

shifts accelerated as online worship, digital community-building, and social media activism became key spaces of belonging.[65] For many, identity formation became fluid—mediated through networks and values rather than denominational structures.

Declining Institutional Trust

Social Media activism particularly has had a unique impact on how the Church is viewed. While many still honor the Church's legacy, younger adults often question whether traditional structures and leadership models address the complexities of modern Black life. Increasingly, Black Churches— and their leaders—are coming under fire for video clips of interactions that get posted online. In these posts, the comment sections are filled with the Disaffected avowing their disappointment and in some cases disdain for the Church. This observation is underscored by research from the Pew Research Center indicates that younger adults report significantly lower trust in religious institutions than older generations.[66] This skepticism reflects broader cultural patterns affecting churches across the United States. For the Black Church, it produces tension between its historic symbolic authority and its contemporary relevance.

Emerging Twenty-First Century Realities

A consequence of COVID19 and the post-pandemic era is that the Church found itself navigating a landscape reshaped by mobility, inequality, generational fragmentation, and digital reorientation. These pressures do not erase its historical significance; rather, they highlight the need for adaptive ministry models. Such models

---

[65] Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Juan Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Pandemic Reflections on Black Faith and Digital Belonging* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022).

[66] Pew Research Center, "Religion and Public Life: Trust, Engagement, and Trends Among Younger Americans," 2021.

will require renewed theological reflection and deeper engagement with emerging generations.

Digital Disruption, Theological Innovation, and the Reorientation of Black Church Identity

Notably, the early twenty-first century has introduced a convergence of technological, theological, and generational forces that continue to reshape the identity of the Black Church. Although these dynamics were already emerging before 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated their influence, revealing new contours of belonging, worship, and community formation. These shifts became visible in this study's focus groups sessions, especially the second group which included a participant from the Baby Boomer generation. The contrast between generational preferences—specifically, older adults' emphasis on Sunday morning fellowship and younger adults' desire for sustained, integrated community—illustrates the depth of the current transition.

Digital Transformation and Hybrid Belonging

Prior to the pandemic, digital engagement functioned largely as a supplemental tool for most Black congregations. The sudden cessation of in-person gatherings required rapid digital adaptation, ushering in what scholars describe as a form of *virtual embodiment*—a communal presence mediated through livestream worship, chat interactions, and digital prayer spaces.[67] Many participants in this study affirmed that technology allowed them to maintain spiritual rhythms during life transitions, relocations,

[67] Lisa Bowens and Walter Fluker, "Virtual Embodiment and the Future of Black Church Worship," *Journal of Theology and Ministry* 26, no. 2 (2020): 112–130.

and emotional challenges. One participant noted that technology "allowed him to bring church to himself," especially during difficult seasons.

At the same time, participants across generations expressed that digital worship alone could not fully substitute for embodied relationships. Younger adults emphasized the need for interactive forms of online engagement—breakout groups, relational spaces, and direct pastoral access—rather than passive viewing. This mirrors emerging research demonstrating that digital ministry is most effective when accompanied by opportunities for relational connection and spiritual conversation.[68]

Evolving Theological Expectations in a Fragmented Era

Contemporary Black theological discourse increasingly foregrounds embodiment, mental health, trauma-awareness, and intersectional justice.[69] These emphases resonate strongly with the focus group participants' critiques of traditional church culture. Several described judgmental preaching, moralistic expectations, and hierarchical leadership as barriers to belonging. One participant articulated that certain preaching styles felt "exclusive," creating environments in which she felt guilt rather than spiritual growth. This speaks to a shift toward frameworks that address lived experience for current realties. These currents position the Black Church not only as a site of doctrinal instruction but also as a space for psychological healing, communal affirmation, and ethical critique.

---

[68] Keri Day, "Digital Black Faith and the Democratization of Worship," *International Review of Mission* 110, no. 2 (2021): 352–368.

[69] Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* (New York: Convergent, 2023), 3–10.

Generational Reorientation and the Redefinition of Community

The addition of a Baby Boomer participant in the second focus group illuminated a meaningful generational distinction:

- **Older adults valued Sunday fellowship**—ritual gathering, familiar faces, and shared weekly rhythms.
- **Younger adults desired ongoing community**—relationships integrated into daily life, emotional transparency, mental health support, and digital connection through the week.

This generational contrast reflects national studies showing that Millennials and Gen Z exhibit high spiritual curiosity but low institutional loyalty.[70] Participants in both groups emphasized that they were drawn to authenticity, community, and relevance rather than tradition or formal membership. Several individuals stated that what pushed them away from church was not theology, but hypocrisy, judgment, and the lack of relational depth.

Reimagining Belonging at the Crossroads

Taken together, these findings reveal that the Black Church is navigating a critical crossroads. Older generations continue to cherish the communal memory and ritual coherence of Sunday worship, while younger adults gravitate toward relational ecosystems characterized by authenticity, continuity, and emotional safety. The pandemic intensified this divergence, underscoring the need for ministry models that affirm both historic identity and emerging expressions of community. As digital culture reshapes expectations of accessibility and belonging, the Black Church must discern how to integrate hybrid connection, embodied care, and justice-oriented theology into a cohesive ministry identity.

---

[70] Patricia Snell Herzog and Erin F. Johnston, "Religious Change and Generational Shifts Among Black Millennials and Gen Z," *Sociology of Religion* 82, no. 4 (2021): 477–499.

Post-Pandemic Realities

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified long-standing vulnerabilities within Black communities and the Black Church. While the Church has historically functioned as a stabilizing presence, the pandemic-era environment disrupted congregational life, reshaped expectations of pastoral care, and heightened societal pressures that many in the Black community were already facing. As a result, the Black Church's contemporary challenges cannot be understood apart from the mental health crisis, widening economic disparities, and the shifting patterns of institutional engagement that have emerged in the post-pandemic era.

The Weight of Mental Health Crises in Black Communities

Even before 2020, mental health disparities were a growing concern within African American communities. The pandemic accelerated these challenges, producing heightened levels of anxiety, depression, grief, and social isolation. Studies reveal that Black Americans experienced disproportionately high rates of pandemic-related trauma due to elevated mortality, economic instability, and frontline exposure.[71]

These dynamics were echoed in both focus groups. Participants repeatedly expressed the need for churches to adopt more holistic approaches to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. One participant articulated a desire for "a church that acknowledges mental health as part of spiritual life," while others described turning to personal therapy, curated music, digital community spaces, and supportive relationships outside of traditional church structures.

---

[71] Ray and Darity, "Race, COVID-19" 1–23.

Younger adults emphasized that emotional safety and wellbeing were inseparable from their expectations of authentic community. Many noted that judgmental sermons, rigid norms, and lack of emotional transparency pushed them away rather than drawing them in. Their sentiments mirror post-pandemic research showing that younger Black adults expect faith communities to integrate trauma awareness, vulnerability, and mental health resourcing into their core practices.[72] This is stark shift from past practices that made mental health a taboo topic and folks were told to simply, "pray about it."

Economic Instability and the Intensification of Inequality

The economic fallout of the pandemic also widened preexisting disparities in income, employment, and wealth within the Black community. While some households were able to maintain stability, others experienced job loss, housing insecurity, and long-term financial strain.[73] Thes realities reshaped the congregational landscape. As financial insecurity grew, many members—especially younger adults—were forced to prioritize immediate survival needs over regular participation in church life, contributing to declining attendance patterns.[74] This reality strained congregational resources, and further expanded pastoral responsibilities, requiring churches to provide direct support in areas such as rent assistance, food access, and employment connections. As a result, pastors

---

[72] Thema Bryant-Davis, "Trauma, Mental Health, and Faith in the Black Community," *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Health* 7, no. 1 (2022): 14–28.

[73] Andre M. Perry and Darrick Hamilton, *Know Your Price: Valuing Black Lives and Property in America's Black Cities* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

[74] RRI (Public Religion Research Institute), *Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social Upheaval* (2022), 11–16; Pew Research Center, *Faith Among Black Americans* (2021), 55–57.

had less time to focus on community building as they were forced to respond to practical needs of the community.

Participants from the focus groups underscored the importance of the Church as a provider of resources and support, particularly during periods of economic hardship. One participant noted that the Church should be a "centralized and powerful" institution that equips families with practical tools, advocacy, and pathways to economic resilience. Yet others expressed that their churches lacked the capacity or infrastructure to meet these needs consistently.

These realities place the Black Church at an inflection point. While many congregations continue to serve as lifelines for struggling families, their ability to do so sustainably has become increasingly challenged by shrinking attendance, reduced giving, and widening social needs. Unfortunately, lacking involvement and insight into the realities of church leadership, it becomes easy for the Disaffected to make false assumptions about the Church, her resources, and her priorities, further perpetuating the distrust that already exists.

Institutional Sustainability and Shifting Patterns of Engagement

One of the most consequential post-pandemic shifts is the changing pattern of congregational engagement. Church attendance trends among Black Americans show that now, many either participate irregularly or exclusively online.[75] Younger adults prioritize relational meaning, justice-centered mission, and integrated community over traditional membership structures. When considered in tandem, this suggests that even those who

[75] Pew Research Center, "Faith Among Black Americans: Attendance, Beliefs, and the Post-Pandemic Shift," 2023.

still affiliate with the Church are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with how they experience Church. This dynamic emerged clearly in both focus groups. Participants who disassociated from church described:

- judgmental or hypocritical behavior,
- the absence of transparency and authenticity,
- lack of representation or belonging,
- unaddressed church hurt, and
- minimal opportunities for meaningful connection.

Even those who continue to engage churches noted that their involvement is shaped less by obligation and more by relational depth, personal well-being, and alignment with contemporary needs.

Navigating the Future: A Call for Adaptive Ministry

The post-pandemic era invites the Black Church to reimagine sustainability not merely in terms of numbers, programs, or institutional maintenance, but in terms of:

- community cohesion,
- mental and emotional well-being,
- digital competency,
- economic empowerment,
- intergenerational understanding, and
- theological depth aligned with contemporary realities.

It is a moment that requires a shift from preservation to transformation—a willingness to evaluate inherited practices and cultivate new models that honor both tradition and innovation. Within this study, adaptive ministry refers to the Church's capacity to discern and respond faithfully to changing cultural, social, and generational conditions while remaining rooted in its core theological convictions and communal identity. The Black Church evolves by holding sacred its historical identity while embracing the emerging needs of younger generations that long for belonging, authenticity, justice, and holistic care. As Chapter 2 concludes, it becomes evident that the social, cultural, and spiritual

forces reshaping the Black Church today are complex and interconnected. Having explored the historical and contemporary challenges shaping this moment, in Chapter 4 will I articulate the research methods used to analyze these dynamics—including mixed-method survey analysis and qualitative focus group inquiry.

Conclusion

The historical and contemporary challenges facing the Black Church reveal an institution shaped by profound resilience and equally profound pressure. From its origins as a sociotheological refuge forged within the trauma of enslavement, the Black Church has carried forward a legacy of communal care, prophetic witness, and spiritual imagination. Yet the twenty-first century has introduced a set of transformative forces—shifting demographics, technological acceleration, cultural fragmentation, and post-pandemic realities—that require the Church to reassess its identity and mission.

The Black Church's earliest theological commitments remain not only present, but relevant in contemporary congregations: the pursuit of dignity, the work of justice, and the formation of communal belonging. What is different however, is that these commitments no longer operate in a social world defined by neighborhood stability, intergenerational continuity, or clear institutional authority. The fragmentation of communal identity makes clear that the conditions that once held Black congregations together—proximity, routine, and shared memory—have been disrupted by economic stratification, digital culture, and generational divergence.

The Church cannot ignore how digital disruption, and emerging theological currents have reshaped expectations of belonging. Younger generations now seek integrated, ongoing community rather than episodic fellowship. They desire authenticity,

vulnerability, and spiritual ecosystems that reflect the complexities of modern life and sensibilities. While older generations continue to find meaning in Sunday fellowship, ritual coherence, and embodied gathering, Churches must find ways to speak to the shifting priories of younger generations. These divergent expectations signal that the Black Church is not experiencing a single crisis but rather navigating multiple, overlapping transitions.

The post-pandemic realities intensify these pressures. Mental health challenges, economic instability, social isolation, and institutional fatigue have converged to redefine what congregational care must entail. The Church is now expected to serve as a site of healing, justice, digital connection, and communal grounding—all while contending with declining attendance and shifting patterns of engagement. For many, the pandemic served as a spiritual reset, revealing both the fragility and the enduring significance of Black religious life.

Across these intersecting conditions, one theme remains clear: the Black Church is at a crossroads. It must discern how to honor its historic identity while embracing the theological depth, relational authenticity, digital fluency, and holistic care demanded by a new generation. Works such as Cole Arthur Riley's *Black Liturgies* remind us that contemporary Black spirituality holds space for lament, embodiment, breath, and contemplative formation, while Nona Jones's *From Social Media to Social Ministry* points toward a future where digital platforms are not merely tools of broadcast but environments of discipleship and community making. These frameworks will become increasingly essential as the Church reimagines how to form, gather, and sustain its people.

In this chapter, we have has traced the forces shaping the present moment. Chapter 3 now turns to the research design and methodology that undergirds this study, outlining how survey data and focus group insights were collected, analyzed, interpreted, and integrated into the broader theological and sociological narrative. This methodological foundation will provide the structure necessary for understanding the trends, experiences, and opportunities that inform the assertion that the Black Church can reclaim and rebuild its relationship with younger generations through adaptive, meaningful, and community-centered ministry.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the declining engagement of Millennials and Gen Zers within the Black Church. The methodological foundation of the study is grounded in the framework articulated by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. Swinton and Mowat argue that practical theological research must attend closely to human experience, situating it within the interpretive work of theology while honoring the integrity of qualitative inquiry.[76] Their approach affirms that the practices, stories, and lived experiences of individuals are fundamental sources for understanding the theological and ecclesial challenges facing contemporary ministry.

This chapter therefore describes this study's theoretical orientation, research questions, qualitative design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytical processes, and ethical considerations. It concludes with reflections on the strengths and limitations of the design.

Theoretical Framework: Practical Theology as Interpretive Inquiry

Swinton and Mowat maintain that practical theology is neither abstract theorizing nor mere application of doctrine. Instead, it is an interpretive discipline that seeks to understand the meaning of human experience in light of God's presence and activity.[77] This approach assumes that:

---

[76] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), x–xi.

[77] Ibid, 6–12.

1. Experience is a genuine theological text.
2. Context shapes the possibilities for faithful action.
3. Qualitative research methods provide access to the lived realities in which God's people struggle, hope, and believe.[78]
4. The goal is transformation, both personal and ecclesial.

This theological orientation shapes the project's methodology. While survey data provided descriptive clarity, the heart of the study rests in the qualitative exploration of how younger adults articulate their experiences of church, community, digital culture, and spiritual longing. These narratives, collected through focus groups, serve as the primary data for theological reflection.

Research Questions

Guided by the insistence that research must emerge from pastoral concern and attend to the "concrete and the particular,"[79] the study centered on the following research questions:

1. How do Millennials and Gen Zers within the Black Church describe their experiences of church, belonging, and community?
2. What social, cultural, and digital forces shape their engagement or disengagement?
3. How do social, cultural, and digital influences shape the faith practices and ecclesial expectations of this demographic?
4. What theological and pastoral insights emerge from their narratives, and how might these insights inform renewed ministry practices that can re-engage this population in sustainable and meaningful ways?

These questions were designed to move the project beyond describing decline toward excavating the deeper patterns at work within the lived experience of this demographic.

---

[78] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 21–24.
[79] Ibid, 14–15.

Research Design

Qualitative Priority within a Mixed-Methods Structure

Although the study utilized quantitative surveys, the overall design followed what Swinton and Mowat describe as a qualitative-priority, multi-source design.[80] Quantitative data supported the project by clarifying prevalence and patterns, but the primary interpretive work relied on qualitative inquiry.

Rationale for Qualitative Focus

Swinton and Mowat caution against treating qualitative research as merely anecdotal. Instead, qualitative work is "rigorous, disciplined, and capable of revealing the meanings embedded in human action and experience."[81] Such an approach was necessary because the ministry problem at hand—spiritual disengagement—is fundamentally a matter of identity, community, trust, and belonging. These experiential dimensions cannot be adequately captured by numerical data alone.

Convergent Structure

For this study, a convergent orientation was adopted in which survey data and focus group findings were analyzed separately and then brought together for interpretive dialogue. The integration reflects Swinton and Mowat's emphasis on the "hermeneutical spiral," where understanding is deepened through movement between different sources of insight.[82]

---

[80] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 75–82.
[81] Ibid, 30–32.
[82] Ibid, 112–115.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Focus Groups as Primary Data Source

Consistent with qualitative-priority research, focus groups were treated as the central means of gathering lived experience. Primary participants were Millennials and Gen Zers who had current or previous involvement in church life. One group included only this demographic: the second included one participant from the Baby Boomer generation to illuminate intergenerational contrasts.

Swinton and Mowat note that qualitative sampling aims for "information-rich cases rather than representativeness."[83] The goal is depth, not statistical generalization. Participants were therefore recruited through ministry networks and community contacts functioning as a purposeful sample of individuals directly affected by the ministry challenge and who would have something to offer. The participants were a mix of the churched, dechurched, and the unchurched, ensuring that a significant breadth of church relationship experiences could be captured.

Survey Participants

Survey participants included a broader group of Millennials and Gen Zers who met basic criteria of church exposure and U.S. residency. The survey findings provided contextual clarity that enriched qualitative interpretation.

---

[83] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 68–72.

Data Collection Methods

Focus Group Procedures

Focus groups were conducted via videoconference using the Zoom platform to accommodate participant availability. Swinton and Mowat emphasize that qualitative interviews must create "a hospitable space for experience to be voiced."[84] Facilitation therefore prioritized:

- open-ended prompts,
- respect for participant agency,
- space for lament, questioning, and complexity,
- recognition of power dynamics between participants and researcher.

A semi-structured guide organized the conversation around themes of belonging, leadership trust, digital influence, community, and barriers to engagement. Cole Arthur Riley's emphasis on embodied honesty and lament informed the tone and depth of the conversations.[85]

Survey Administration

The online survey (hosted on SurveyMonkey) included demographic queries, Likert scale items, and open-ended prompts exploring digital discipleship, spiritual practices, and engagement barriers. While quantitative in format, the survey's purpose—consistent with Swinton and Mowat's framework—was not detached measurement but contextual illumination.

---

[84] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 53–56.

[85] Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022).

Data Analysis Procedures

Theological Hermeneutics as Analytical Framework

Swinton and Mowat argue that qualitative analysis in practical theology is not simply coding data; it is a theological act shaped by hermeneutics.[86] Therefore, analysis proceeded through:

1. **Immersion in the data** through repeated readings of transcripts.
2. **Thematic coding** (open, axial, and selective) informed by grounded-theory methodology.[87]
3. **Hermeneutical reflection**, asking what these experiences reveal about God, community, and ecclesial life.
4. **Movement between data, theological tradition, and ministry context** in Swinton and Mowat's spiral of interpretation.

This process allowed patterns such as distrust of institutions, longing for authentic community, digital spiritual practice, and emotional exhaustion to emerge as both sociological realities and theological questions.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey data were examined using descriptive statistics generated through Python. These findings highlighted frequency patterns (e.g., digital consumption, trust levels, attendance habits) that informed interpretation but remained secondary to the qualitative insights.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical measures included:

- informed consent,
- participant anonymity,
- secure data storage,
- sensitivity to trauma and church hurt,

---

[86] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 89–93.

[87] Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 85–115.

- pastoral responsibility for the well-being of participants.

Due to the prevalence of trauma and institutional disappointment, positioned as Church hurt among younger Black adults, ethical awareness was particularly crucial.

Limitations

The study's limitations reflect its qualitative-priority design:

- purposeful sampling reduces generalizability,
- videoconference focus groups limit nonverbal interpretation,
- one focus group summary file was corrupted (though thematic content was preserved),
- the researcher's positionality may influence interpretation.

Yet, as Swinton and Mowat note, qualitative research does not aim for neutrality but for "faithful, transparent, and reflexive engagement" with real human experience.[88]

Summary

Rooted in the methodological framework of Swinton and Mowat, this study treated the lived experiences of Millennials and Gen Zers as crucial theological texts. Through focus groups, surveys, and interpretive analysis, the research sought to understand the deeper meanings behind generational disengagement and discern pastoral pathways toward renewed community, belonging, and discipleship. The findings emerging from this methodology will be presented in Chapter 4.

[88] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 130–132.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the major findings emerging from the mixed-methods research process and interprets those findings through a practical theological lens. Consistent with Swinton and Mowat's argument that practical theology seeks to "listen deeply to lived experience" as a means of discerning the movement of God within contemporary contexts, these findings arise from the integration of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from adults aged 18–45 across multiple U.S. regions.[89] This chapter interprets these findings at three levels: (1) empirical patterns, (2) theological significance, and (3) ministry implications. These findings reflect a convergence of participant experiences, broader cultural patterns of religious change, and the internal challenges shaping contemporary Black church life.

Overview of Empirical Findings

Declining Institutional Commitment but Persistent Theological Curiosity

Across both survey datasets, a clear pattern emerged: institutional participation is weakening, but personal curiosity about faith has not disappeared. Most of the respondents indicated that they still believe in God or a higher power, even when disengaged from church structures. This aligns with national data showing that "belief has not disappeared, but belonging is increasingly unstable" among Millennials and Gen Z.[90]

---

[89] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 3–5.

[90] Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 499–502.

Participants in the focus group reinforced this trend by contrasting "church attendance" with "spiritual seeking." Several spoke of growing up in churches that framed faith as a weekly ritual rather than a relational journey—an approach that no longer resonates with them. Their language reflected what Nona Jones describes as "the shift from content consumption to spiritual community," where digital platforms increasingly shape how meaning and belonging are negotiated.[91]

Generational Differences in Expectations of Community

Focus group participants provided the greatest insight into community expectations. Their responses demonstrated pronounced generational differentiation regarding the meaning of "church community." Younger respondents (18–30) emphasized ongoing relational interaction, mutual care, and accessible spaces beyond Sunday gatherings. When pressed further, it became clear that they desired a full integration of the religious life into their "everyday" life. Unbeholden to respectability standards of older generations, younger generations indicated a willingness to bring the sacred into secular spaces. For some in this demographic, conversations about God while having a drink at the bar with their friends is as much a valid religious experience as attending Sunday morning service. Conversely, the older participants in the secondary focus group affirmed the value of Sunday fellowship as a primary expression of congregational life. Although the older participant considered herself progressive and open-minded, she struggled with the idea of the bar as a sacred space.

[91] Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 15–18.

Embedded in these findings are an indication of broader societal shifts wherein community is understood less as a place and more as an ongoing relational ecosystem. Cole Arthur Riley's reflections on embodied presence and relational dignity illuminate this shift by reminding faith leaders that "community is not merely proximity; it is the work of mutual beholding."[92] Younger participants' frustration with superficial or episodic fellowship suggests a desire for congregations to cultivate spaces that honor personhood in deeper and more sustainable ways. While the idea of Church service at the bar may be extreme, it does reflect an opportunity for the Church to reengage the idiom, "meeting people where they are" and apply it to next contexts.

Dissatisfaction with Church Leadership Transparency and Accountability

Survey respondents in response to the open-ended questions frequently cited concerns about trust, transparency, and accountability in church leadership. This disillusionment appears less connected to doctrinal disagreement and more tied to relational credibility. This was underscored by focus group participants who described previous church hurt, inconsistency between proclaimed and practiced values, and obscure decision-making processes.

These observations mirror recent research indicating that credibility and relational authenticity are primary drivers of ecclesial trust for younger generations.[93] The data suggests that the crisis declining church engagement facing many Black churches may be less theological than relational and organizational in nature.

---

[92] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 44.

[93] Barna Group, *The Connected Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2019), 27–29.

Focus Group Evidence: Authenticity as a Measure of Trust

The theme of authenticity emerged repeatedly in focus group conversations as participants reflected on both their disassociation from and continued connection to the Black Church. Across narratives, authenticity was not framed as stylistic relevance or theological novelty, but as relational integrity, emotional honesty, and consistency between the Church's stated values and lived practices.

Example One: Hypocrisy, Representation, and Trust

One focus group participant described how perceived hypocrisy and lack of representation contributed to disengagement from the church. He described growing up with a strong connection to the Black Church as a communal and familial space yet later experiencing disillusionment following leadership failure and racial exclusion. After his family left one church due to a pastor's moral misconduct, they joined another congregation where he encountered racism and a sense of not belonging. These experiences disrupted his trust in church leadership and undermined the Church's moral credibility. For him, authenticity was closely tied to integrity, accountability, and the Church's ability to embody the communal values it proclaims.

Example Two: Judgmental Atmosphere and Emotional Exclusion

Another participant articulated disengagement rooted in what she perceived as a judgmental and prescriptive church environment. She described sermons and church culture that dictated how people should live, dress, or behave, often producing guilt rather than spiritual growth. This approach felt exclusive rather than invitational, particularly for younger people navigating identity and life complexity. Authenticity, from her perspective, required spaces where individuals could explore faith without fear of

condemnation. The absence of such emotional safety contributed to her difficulty sustaining meaningful connection to church life.

Example Three: Transparency, Holistic Care, and Belonging

Two other participants offered perspectives that connected authenticity to transparency and holistic care. One reflected on positive early experiences of church as a vibrant social and formative space, while also noting discomfort as she grew older and felt scrutinized for appearance rather than supported as a whole person. The other participant, navigating divorce and personal healing, expressed hesitation in reconnecting with a church community that lacked openness and relational depth. Both emphasized a desire for churches that acknowledge mental health, life transitions, and personal struggle without stigma. For these participants, authenticity was expressed through honesty, inclusion, and a willingness to engage the full realities of congregants' lives.

Together, these focus group narratives demonstrate that authenticity functions as a relational and ethical category rather than a stylistic preference. Participants did not disengage due to theological rejection or loss of faith, but because of perceived gaps between the Church's professed commitments and its lived practices. Authenticity was associated with integrity, transparency, emotional safety, and holistic care. These findings suggest that adaptive ministry efforts aimed at re-engaging younger generations must prioritize relational trust and communal credibility alongside worship and proclamation.

Interpretation of Findings Through a Practical Theological Lens

The Significance of Lived Experience for Ecclesial Discernment

Practical theology serves as a bridge between lived experience and Christian tradition, helping the church discern "faithful presence" in real contexts.[94] The convergence of declining attendance with persistent spiritual hunger suggests that the core issue is not a loss of faith but a mismatch between ecclesial structures and the lived realities of contemporary Black adults. Therefore, this project approaches context as a theological source, treating the lived experiences of Black Millennials and Generation Z—their wounds, questions, practices, and acts of resistance—as *theological texts* through which God's activity, human longing, and communal meaning are discerned.

Participant responses, therefore, function not as critiques from the outside but as relevant and informative theological data—expressions of how they navigate their relationship with God, others, and community in a rapidly shifting culture. Their experiences reveal the disconnect between traditional forms of ministry and the complex spiritual identities present among adults ages 18–45.

Reframing Digital Engagement as Ecclesial Space

The findings of the research indicate that digital platforms are not merely communication tools but spiritual environments where belonging, formation, and pastoral care take place. Participants described following Christian content online, joining virtual prayer groups, and using social media for theological exploration. One participant highlighted his regular engagement with a popular podcaster, Larry Reid. Larry Reid's

---

[94] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 85–90.

successful use of social media to generate stimulating and thought-provoking dialogue[95] amongst his followers serves as a powerful proof of concept that online engagement can in fact foster a sense of community. Nona Jones's argument that digital ministry is not about technological adaptation but about cultivating "digital discipleship ecosystems" that mirror the relational core of the early church[96] underscores this point.

From a fundamental and practical theological point of view, the findings challenge the binary between "online" and "in-person," calling for instead, a hybrid ecclesiology that affirms embodiment while also acknowledging the new pathways through which people seek spiritual connection.

The Need for Humanizing Community and Liturgical Imagination

Cole Arthur Riley's emphasis on dignity, rest, and embodied presence provides a theological frame for interpreting participants' longing for deeper community.[97] Dissatisfaction with superficial fellowship reveals a desire for spaces where individuals are seen, held, and valued—not just taught or managed. This finding suggests that future ministry models must recover liturgical and communal practices that honor the complexity of Black bodies, emotions, and narratives. They must realize and respond to the fact that just as the Black Church is not monolithic, neither are her constituents.

---

[95] Larry Reid Live, Facebook page, accessed October 25, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/LarryReidLive.

[96] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 63–67.

[97] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 112–114.

Toward a Theological Interpretation of the Crisis

Beyond Decline: The Emergence of New Ecclesial Possibilities

Although the survey data confirms patterns of institutional decline, the qualitative reflections reveal emerging opportunities for a renewed Black church. The desire for authentic community, transparency, and integrated spiritual formation signals a longing for ecclesial life that is adaptive to the changing needs of a younger generation. These findings align with empirical research showing that congregations that prioritize relational ecosystems over formal programs tend to engage younger adults more effectively.[98]

The Central Role of Trust and Authentic Leadership

A recurring theme from the focus groups and survey data is that trust—not theology—is a primary barrier for many adults ages 18–45. The theological interpretation of this points to a renewed understanding of pastoral leadership as a vocation grounded in vulnerability, accountability, and mutuality. The crisis, therefore, is not merely organizational but deeply spiritual, requiring leaders to embody the relational integrity that younger adults instinctively seek.

Summary of Findings

The findings reveal a complex but hopeful picture. While institutional commitment is declining, spiritual hunger remains vibrant. Participants' narratives point to a theology of belonging rooted in authenticity, relational depth, and integrated community. When synthesized through the lens of practical theology, digital ministry,

---

[98] Barna Group, *Restoring Relationships: How Churches Can Help People Heal* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2021), 11–14.

and Black contemplative traditions, these findings illuminate the possibility that the contemporary decline may actually be the soil for ecclesial renewal—if the church can reimagine how it embodies community, discipleship, and leadership.

Implications of the Findings

The integrated findings from the surveys and focus groups reveal a series of practical and theological implications that can shape how the Black church must reimagine ministry for the Disaffected in the current cultural moment. Following Swinton and Mowat's insistence that practical theology interprets lived experience as "a source of theological wisdom,"[99] the implications below translate the research into ministry-relevant insight.

Implications for Black Church Leadership

It is evident from the research that leadership trustworthiness has become a decisive factor in young adult engagement. Survey data showed that concerns about transparency, accountability, and consistency in leadership behavior outweighed disagreements about doctrine or worship style. Focus group participants described past experiences where decision-making was unclear, spiritual authority was misused, or leadership lacked relational authenticity.

These findings suggest that leadership credibility is no longer assumed; it must be cultivated. Practical theology frames this as a vocational challenge, calling pastors and ministry leaders to discern how their practices either obscure or reveal the character of Christ.[100] Leaders who embody vulnerability, openness, and shared decision-making

[99] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 3–5.
[100] Ibid., 89–94.

demonstrate the kind of relational integrity that younger adults intuitively seek. The implication is clear: leadership formation must prioritize emotional intelligence, accountability structures, and practices that nurture communal trust.

Implications for Community Formation and Congregational Life

Participants expressed a consistent longing for deeper, ongoing community rather than episodic Sunday fellowship. This desire reflects a broader redefinition of community as a relational ecosystem rather than a weekly gathering. Cole Arthur Riley's articulation of community as "the work of mutual beholding"—a space where dignity, presence, and emotional safety are honored[101]—provides a theological frame for interpreting this shift.

Churches that hope to engage younger adults must transition from programmatic activity to relational presence, cultivating environments where belonging is actively practiced and affirmed. Congregational life must expand beyond the sanctuary to include small groups, relational cohorts, intergenerational circles of care, embodied rituals that communicate welcome and dignity. And for the bold, out of the box thinker, this must also be expanded to include unconventional spaces where community happens organically such as social gatherings and bars. The implication is not merely structural but theological: the church must become a community that bears witness to God's relational nature through its internal life.

Implications for Digital Ministry and Hybrid Ecclesiology

From the data, we see that digital platforms are not peripheral but central to how younger adults navigate spirituality, gather information, and build community. Participants described an increased willingness to engage sermons, prayer communities,

[101] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 112.

pastoral content, and worship experiences online before and often instead of attending a physical church. This moment therefore moment requires churches to shift from using social media for "content broadcasting" to cultivating "digital discipleship ecosystems."[102]

Consequently, digital ministry must be seen as a theological issue rather than a technical adaptation. For a generation shaped by digital communication, online spaces function as legitimate sites of discipleship, pastoral care, and communal formation. As a result, Churches must construct hybrid ecclesiologies that integrate physical and digital presence without diminishing the sacramental and relational significance of embodied gathering. This implies that online ministry is now essential to the mission of the church—not optional or supplemental.

Implications for Discipleship and Formation Models

Notably, while institutional participation is declining, the findings show that spiritual hunger remains strong. Participants expressed interest in Scripture, prayer, vocational discernment, and community but resisted rigid or programmatic discipleship models that emphasize consumption over participation, aligning with Swinton and Mowat's assertion that formation must emerge from reflective engagement with lived experience.[103]

Discipleship for Millennials and Gen Zers, therefore, must be conversational, relational, and centered on shared exploration rather than hierarchical instruction. Practices such as story-sharing, guided reflection, contextual Bible study, embodied

[102] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 45–52.
[103] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 131–36.

liturgies, and mentoring relationships are particularly resonant. The requires a shift away from one-directional teaching toward a more dialogical, participatory, and experiential form of formation.

Implications for Organizational Culture and Ministry Systems

One need that the research highlighted is for churches to examine not only their public-facing ministries but also their internal systems and cultures. Participants expressed concerns about inconsistent communication, lack of transparency, and unclear decision-making, indicating that ministry systems often undermine relational credibility. This is supported by research demonstrating that organizational clarity is a key driver of generational trust.[104]

What this suggests is that churches must adopt ministry systems that reflect their theological commitments—structures that promote integrity, clarity, and accountability. This includes transparent governance, clear communication pathways, shared leadership models, and evaluative practices that incorporate congregational voice. Such systems not only strengthen internal health but also communicate a commitment to mutual trust and collaborative mission.

Summary of Practical Implications

Taken together, these implications reveal that the path forward for the Black church is not simply structural but deeply theological. The research demonstrates that the Disaffected are not disinterested in faith; they are disinterested in ecclesial forms that feel disconnected, inauthentic, or relationally thin. The findings call for leadership grounded

[104] Barna Group, *Restoring Relationships: How Churches Can Help People Heal* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2021), 11–14.

in integrity, communities shaped by mutual care, digital ministries integrated into the fabric of congregational life, and discipleship models that affirm the lived experiences of younger adults.

Conclusion

This chapter synthesized the empirical findings of the study and interpreted them through a practical theological lens shaped by the work of Swinton and Mowat, Nona Jones, and Cole Arthur Riley. The research revealed that Millennials and Gen Zers are not rejecting faith but reevaluating the forms through which Christian community, discipleship, and leadership are expressed. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates that declining church attendance among younger adults cannot be reduced to apathy or secularization; instead, it reflects a complex interplay of relational credibility, cultural recalibration, and a deep desire for communities that honor dignity, authenticity, and spiritual growth.

This chapter further demonstrated that younger adults continue to exhibit strong spiritual curiosity even as institutional commitment weakens. Their expectations of church leadership emphasize transparency, accountability, and relational integrity, while their expectations of community prioritize ongoing relational presence over episodic fellowship. The prominence of digital engagement underscores the need for hybrid ecclesial models that integrate virtual and embodied forms of ministry as legitimate sites of formation and belonging. Finally, the findings highlight the necessity of discipleship models that are dialogical, experiential, and grounded in lived experience rather than hierarchical delivery of content.

Interpreted together, these insights reveal not merely a crisis but an opportunity for ecclesial transformation. The patterns identified in this chapter point to a renewed form of Black church life—one capable of embodying relational depth, communal imagination, and theologically grounded innovation. These findings form the foundation for the ministry model and practical recommendations that will be presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

MINISTRY MODEL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Theological Rationale for the Ministry Model

The ministry model proposed in this chapter is grounded in a theological vision that honors lived experience as a site of divine activity, embraces communal discernment as a pathway to transformation, and reflects the social, spiritual, and relational needs of Black Millennials and Gen Zers. This rationale emerges from the practical theological conviction that Christian formation does not occur through unilateral instruction, but rather through shared reflection on Scripture, experience, and the Spirit's movement within community. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat argue that practical theology "listens to the voices and experiences of people as a means of discerning God's presence in the world," and that discernment becomes most faithful when it arises from the community rather than being imposed upon it.[105] This framework directly informs the interactive, dialogical, and de-centered approach to formation that characterizes the ministry model presented here.

Adaptive Ministry as Theological Discernment

Throughout this project, *adaptive ministry* refers to a theological and pastoral posture that responds faithfully to changing cultural, generational, and communal conditions while remaining rooted in the core commitments of the Black Church tradition. Adaptive ministry is not defined by innovation, technological adoption, or institutional survival strategies. Rather, it reflects a disciplined practice of discernment—

[105] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 3–5.

listening carefully to lived experience, attending to communal wounds, and reimagining ministry structures in ways that preserve theological integrity while increasing relational trust and communal belonging.

In this sense, adaptive ministry builds upon the Black Church's historic capacity to reinterpret tradition in moments of crisis. Just as earlier generations adapted worship, leadership, and community practices in response to enslavement, segregation, and systemic exclusion, contemporary ministry leaders are called to discern how faith must be embodied amid digital saturation, economic precarity, political polarization, and generational distrust.

Ministry Context for Innovation: Connections Church as Proof of Concept

Although the Connections Formation Model was developed in response to the broader ministry problem affecting Black Millennials and Gen Zers, its shape was also informed through ongoing ministry practice within my congregational context. Connections Church functioned as the practical environment—a proof of concept—through which components of the model were prototyped, tested, and refined—this is an ongoing process. The digital Bible studies, hybrid gathering rhythms, dialogical learning practices, and holistic mentoring initiatives described later in this chapter were each implemented in various forms within the ministry life of Connections Church. Notably, this context did not serve as a research site for data collection; rather, it provided a lived ecclesial space in which theological commitments, leadership practices, and formation strategies could be embodied and observed. As noted by Swinton and Mowat, practical theology emerges not only from academic inquiry but from the iterative

cycle of action and reflection within real communities.[106] Connections Church therefore offered a dynamic setting in which the ministry model could be informed by lived experience, pastoral discernment, and congregational response. Its role as a proof of concept allows the Connections Formation Model to emerge not as an abstract proposal, but as a tested and contextually grounded ministry framework.

Biblical Foundations Shaped by Pastoral Practice

The theological center of this model arises from the Scriptures that have repeatedly shaped the teaching life of Bible studies. The exploration of *2 Timothy 3*, especially the contrast between external forms of godliness and genuine inner transformation, forms one of the ministry's central interpretive themes. Throughout Bible study, participants engaged deeply with the invitation to become "clean, not just neat," recognizing that the Christian life demands authenticity rather than performative spirituality. This theme aligns with the broader findings of the research, which indicate that Millennials and Gen Zers reject superficial expressions of faith and instead long for communities where transparency, self-examination, and sincerity are prioritized.

Likewise, reflection on *Genesis 32*—Jacob's wrestling at the river Jabbok—has shaped the ministry's understanding of spiritual identity. Jacob's encounter with God becomes a paradigm for spiritual perseverance, honest struggle, and the possibility of divine transformation amid pain. In Bible studies, participants interpreted this narrative as an invitation to hold onto God even when the process is uncomfortable, trusting that struggle can lead to renewed identity and clarified purpose. This theology of wrestling

[106] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 6–7.

affirms that Christian formation is neither linear nor sanitized; it requires courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to confront one's deepest fears.

The study of *Galatians* also shaped a theology of liberation and communal responsibility. The emphasis on freedom from legalism, the call to "serve one another in love," and the rejection of traditions that bind rather than liberate became central themes in Bible studies. These discussions reinforced the need for a ministry model that resists oppressive structures and cultivates a community defined by compassion, justice, and mutual responsibility. Emerging out of this was a commitment to deconstruct misogynistic, Eurocentric, and exclusionary theological frameworks, replacing them with Womanist, Liberation, Queer, and Black theological voices that better reflect the experiences and needs of my community.

Finally, the "salt of the earth" studies articulated a theology of covenant, purity, preservation, and witness. Salt's ability to purify, preserve, and draw out hidden potential became a metaphor for Christian life in community. Participants interpreted salt as a symbol of consistency, integrity, and endurance—qualities that younger adults often feel are missing in the institutional church. This understanding provides both a theological anchor and an ethical imperative for the ministry model: to cultivate communities that preserve moral courage, purify harmful ideologies, and draw people toward God through authenticity and love.

Relational Theology, Black Contemplative Traditions, and Dignity

Cole Arthur Riley's emphasis on embodied dignity and the sanctity of human experience offers a relational theological lens that aligns naturally with the ministry's interactive formation practices. Riley contends that spiritual formation begins with the

recognition that every person carries a "sacred interiority," and that communities encounter God not only through doctrine, but through the mutual presence and stories of one another.[107] The ministry model's reliance on dialogue, vulnerability, and shared reflection embodies this contemplative posture. By inviting participants to bring their emotions, questions, and lived experiences into the space, the community practices a form of beholding that affirms each person as a site of divine wisdom.

This approach resonates strongly with younger Black adults, many of whom articulate a longing for church spaces where dignity is honored and their full humanity is welcomed. When participants share their narratives and wrestle with Scripture together, theological insight emerges from the collective body rather than from a single authoritative voice. Decentering the pastor in this context is not a rejection of leadership but an affirmation of a relational theology in which God is encountered through mutuality, shared dignity, and the lived experiences of the community.[108] This contemplative frame moves the stories of the marginalized from being supplemental to being indispensable for the community's encounter with God. In this sense, dignity is restored, and value is recognized for all of God's children.

Liberation and Shared Authority as Theological Commitments

Intentionally de-centering pastoral authority reflects a theological commitment to honoring the presence of God among those whose voices have often been marginalized. God's revelation emerges most clearly through the lived experiences of the oppressed, challenging any ecclesial structure that concentrates power in ways that obscure these

[107] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 3–10.
[108] Ibid, 7-10.

voices.[109] Within the Bible study context, participants engage Scripture by asking questions, challenging interpretations, and shaping the direction of the conversation. This practice of shared authority becomes a pastoral act, creating space for healing as it loosens the patterns of control and silence that many younger adults associate with church hurt and mistrust.

For many—especially those that have experienced exclusion or dismissal in traditional church settings—shared authority signals a rediscovery of theological agency. It affirms that their experiences contribute meaningfully to the community's discernment of God's activity. This model embodies a vision of church in which divine wisdom is not confined to the pastor but arises through the collective experiences of the gathered body. Within this liberationist frame, elevating marginalized voices is not merely a gesture of inclusion, rather it is a necessary expression of faith in a God who is uniquely present and active among those historically excluded from the centers of power.

Digital Ecclesiology as Legitimate Ministerial Space

Nona Jones's conception of digital ministry as a form of authentic discipleship further informs the model's theological rationale. Jones argues that digital spaces are not merely tools for broadcasting content but environments for cultivating spiritual relationships and community.[110] The ministry's interactive online Bible studies and relational digital engagement embody this theological insight, treating virtual space as a location where discipleship, fellowship, and communal reflection genuinely occur. This

[109] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 19–35.
[110] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 63–67.

aligns with research findings indicating that younger adults view digital environments as valid and accessible spiritual spaces.

Conclusion of the Theological Rationale

Taken together, these theological commitments form the foundation for the ministry model: A

- Communal,
- dialogical,
- justice-oriented,
- digitally integrated,
- relationally authentic

approach to Christian formation.

This model seeks to embody the trust, transparency, and spiritual depth that was consistently expressed in the research. It recognizes that the church's renewal will not emerge from institutional maintenance but from the cultivation of communities that honor lived experience, practice shared discernment, and embody the liberating, restorative love of Christ.

Description of the Connections Formation Ministry Model

The Connections Formation Model is a holistic, dialogical, and justice-oriented ministry framework shaped by the wisdom, experience, and spiritual imagination found within the Black theological tradition. As a ministry model grounded in practical theology and informed by empirical research, it seeks to honor the sacredness of lived experience, the urgency of communal belonging, and the liberative call of the Gospel. This model emerges from the intersection of four core components: **(1) dialogical and interactive biblical reflection, (2) hybrid ecclesiology and digital belonging, (3) holistic formation for youth and young adults, and (4) embodied gatherings with**

intentional community partnership. These components reflect a ministry vision deeply connected to Black faith traditions that have long held communal discernment, relational trust, embodied worship, and justice-oriented discipleship as essential features of Christian life.

Dialogical Bible Study and Communal Theological Reflection

At the center of the Connections Formation Model is a dialogical Bible study structure rooted in the Black church's historic emphasis on communal interpretation, testimony, and shared wisdom. Within Black Christian traditions, biblical authority has never been detached from the lived experiences of Black people navigating oppression, hope, struggle, and perseverance. James Cone asserts that Scripture must be interpreted "from the perspective of the oppressed," and that theological meaning emerges when communities wrestle with the text together.[111] This perspective aligns directly with the interactive practice evident in Bible study, where participants raised questions, interrogated translations, applied Scripture to contemporary concerns, and collaboratively constructed meaning.

To be true to its fundamental nature, Christian formation must honor the experiences and voices of those historically marginalized, insisting that theology becomes authentic when it is shaped communally rather than delivered through hierarchical structures. This is achieved through the interactive dynamic present in these studies, where the pastor intentionally de-centers institutional authority to elevate shared

[111] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 50th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 18–20.

discernment. Such a posture reflects a distinctly Black womanist commitment to mutuality, dignity, and the democratization of spiritual knowledge.

While practical theology scholars such as Swinton and Mowat provide methodological grounding for communal discernment, the *content* and *spirit* of the ministry's dialogical approach are clearly shaped by the interpretive practices of the Black church, where critical conversation, testimony, and shared struggle have historically been vehicles for theological wisdom.

This dialogical method is evident in the recurring themes explored within the Bible studies—internal transformation ("clean, not neat"), identity formation (Jacob's wrestle in Genesis 32), and liberation from legalism (Galatians). These themes resonate deeply with Black theological traditions that emphasize the transformative encounter with God in the midst of human struggle and the pursuit of freedom. The Bible study becomes an act of communal liberation and meaning making, forming disciples capable of discerning God's presence in their daily lives.

Hybrid Ecclesiology and Digital Belonging

The hybrid ecclesiology within the Connections Formation Model emerges naturally from both contemporary ministry realities and the Black church's long tradition of cultivating community in the face of dispersal, migration, and fragmented social structures. Willie James Jennings notes that Christian belonging must be understood as a Spirit-led reimagining of community that transcends geography and challenges dominant cultural boundaries.[112] This theological lens affirms hybrid ministry not as a concession

[112] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 289–294.

to modernity but as a continuation of Black ecclesial creativity—a willingness to gather wherever freedom, dignity, and connection can flourish.

Digital space becomes sacred space within this model. Black Christians have historically transformed nontraditional spaces—homes, brush harbors, storefronts, streets—into sanctuaries of encounter and survival. Howard Thurman describes this as the creation of "spiritual refuge" where those navigating insecurity and alienation can experience God's presence.[113] Digital gathering functions in a similar way for many Millennials and Gen Zers, providing low-barrier access to community, authenticity, and pastoral care.

The online Bible studies and relational digital practices align with Nona Jones's emphasis on digital discipleship as an extension of Christian community, yet the deeper theological energy comes from Black ecclesial history: the belief that community is formed wherever people gather to share their stories, lament their pain, celebrate their resilience, and seek God together. Cole Arthur Riley's reflections on dignity and embodied presence reinforce this insight, reminding us that belonging is cultivated through the sacred act of witnessing one another's humanity—a truth that gives this ministry model its spiritual depth.[114]

The Bible studies demonstrate that digital gathering enabled meaningful vulnerability, theological curiosity, emotional honesty, and cross-regional relational

---

[113] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 32–35.

[114] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 3–10.

connection—an embodiment of Black diasporic communal imagination expressed through contemporary technology.

Community Partnerships as Pathways to Formation and Flourishing

Community Partnerships as Pathways to Formation and Flourishing constitutes the third pillar of the Connections Formation Model. This pillar reflects the priorities of Black Millennials and Gen Zers who increasingly seek church communities that engage meaningfully with the social, economic, and emotional realities of their lives. For many in this age group, meaningful ministry includes opportunities to participate in community transformation, serve others, and collaborate with organizations already doing impactful work. Partnering with existing nonprofits, mentoring groups, and community-based initiatives therefore becomes more than an outreach strategy—it becomes a concrete way for young adults to live out their faith through purpose-driven engagement that aligns with their values and everyday concerns.[115]

Rather than placing the full weight of ministry on internal programs alone, the model recognizes that young adults are drawn to churches that connect them to work already happening in the neighborhood. Whether through mentoring high school students, supporting educational equity initiatives, joining mental health advocacy efforts, or participating in economic empowerment projects, these partnerships give young adults avenues to serve in ways that feel authentic, relational, and socially meaningful. This approach honors their desire for ministries that bridge spiritual commitment with tangible community impact.

---

[115] Barna Group*, The State of the Black Church, 22–30.*

This outward-facing engagement also resonates with the historic identity of the Black Church, which has long embodied a holistic understanding of ministry that attends to both spiritual formation and communal uplift. Howard Thurman's reflections on the inseparability of spiritual vitality and social conditions remind us that ministry rooted in dignity must take seriously the environments in which people live.[116] Partnerships with community organizations extend this legacy by affirming that spiritual growth is nurtured not only within the sanctuary but also through acts of service, justice, and neighborly care.

In this formation model, holistic ministry is expressed through opportunities that help young adults cultivate critical thinking, emotional resilience, responsible stewardship, and spiritual groundedness within community. Contemporary research confirms that Gen Z and Millennial adults gravitate toward ministries that address the full ecosystem of human experience—mental health, economic stability, relationships, identity, purpose, and spirituality.[117] By partnering with organizations already engaged in this work, the ministry speaks directly to these priorities, offering young adults meaningful avenues for impact while continuing the Black Church's historic commitment to liberation, wholeness, and communal flourishing.

Embodied Gatherings as Worship

While digital belonging is essential, embodied presence remains a vital expression of the Black Christian tradition. In this ministry model, regularly scheduled Gospel Brunches served as a tangible expression of the embodied joy, ritual imagination, and

---

[116] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 35–45

[117] Barna Group*, The State of the Black Church*, 28–32.

relational connection that have shaped Black worship for generations. Cole Arthur Riley's reflections on embodied dignity reinforce this emphasis, reminding us that spiritual identity is formed through shared presence, communal emotion, and the honoring of each person's sacred humanity.[118] Carefully curated events such as Gospel Brunch, Prayer Breakfasts, and Bible Trivia Game Nights reflect these dynamics in a culturally resonant and spiritually rich format, shifting the focus from mere frequency of gatherings to the quality of connection and impact for participants. Further they create opportunity for organic community building.

Summary

Anchored in Black theological imagination and practical theological method, the Connections Formation Model integrates dialogical reflection, hybrid gathering, holistic formation, and embodied community engagement into a unified vision for ministry. Each component addresses a key theme identified in the empirical research: the longing for authenticity, the need for relational trust, the desire for meaningful community, and the hope for justice-centered Christian expression.

This model represents an intentional return to the liberative, communal, and imaginative heart of the Black Christian tradition. It seeks to cultivate disciples who can wrestle honestly, love deeply, discern communally, engage digitally, gather joyfully, and act justly. In doing so, the Connections Formation Model offers a viable and transformative response to the evolving spiritual landscape facing Millennials and Gen Zers.

---

[118] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 3–10.

Implementation Plan

The implementation plan unfolds in phases that reflect both the theological commitments of the ministry and the practical realities of forming community. Each phase builds upon the last, weaving together relational formation, hybrid participation, holistic development, and community partnership into a sustainable and liberative ministry ecosystem. This phased approach mirrors the adaptive wisdom Albert Raboteau identifies in early Black Christian communities, who created sacred spaces of refuge, formation, and liberation within shifting cultural landscapes.[119]

The implementation plan consists of five phases:

1. Establishing interactive digital formation spaces
2. Developing relational cohorts and pastoral accompaniment
3. Cultivating embodied gatherings
4. Launching community partnership initiatives
5. Forming accountable and emotionally intelligent leadership structures

Together, these phases provide a comprehensive trajectory for ministry development grounded in the relational and liberative ethos of the Black Church.

Phase One: Establishing Interactive Digital Formation Spaces

The first phase focuses on cultivating an interactive digital space for Bible study, communal discernment, and spiritual formation. Digital gatherings serve as foundational environments, particularly for Millennials and Gen Z who value accessible, relationally safe spaces for theological exploration. Raboteau notes that Black Christians historically gathered in brush arbors, homes, and other improvised settings as sacred refuges where

[119] Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South. Updated edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004

communal presence and resilience took shape.[120] Digital spaces function similarly here, becoming a site of vulnerability, shared interpretation, and spiritual depth.

This phase includes:

- Biweekly or weekly interactive Bible studies with dialogical engagement.
- Digital communication rhythms—group messaging, pastoral check-ins, emails—to support belonging.
- Facilitator training to ensure shared authority and communal discernment.
- Integration of spiritual practices such as prayer, testimony, and contemplative reflection rooted in Black spirituality.

This digital foundation provides the relational and theological structure for subsequent phases.

Phase Two: Developing Relational Cohorts and Pastoral Accompaniment

After establishing digital rhythms, the ministry cultivates small relational cohorts that provide deeper accompaniment, accountability, and spiritual formation. Howard Thurman teaches that authentic community emerges through presence, mutual care, and the honoring of each person's humanity.[121] These cohorts embody that commitment by creating intimate spaces where participants reflect on Scripture, integrate faith with daily life, and support one another's growth.

This phase includes:

- Small cohorts (5–8 participants) organized around themes such as identity, vocation, justice work, or spiritual practices.
- Cohort leaders trained to practice de-centered authority and shared discernment.
- Pastoral care rhythms grounded in empathy, presence, and truth-telling.
- Encouragement of vulnerability, theological questioning, and spiritual discipline.

In this phase communal bonds are deepened and forms participants through mutual care and shared theological reflection.

---

[120] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 213–218.

[121] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 43–45.

Phase Three: Cultivating Embodied Gatherings

Phase Three introduces embodied gatherings as extensions of digital and cohort-based ministry. These gatherings honor the embodied, celebratory, and relational expressions of Black Christian worship. Otis Moss III describes Black liturgy as a space shaped by joy, lament, rhythm, storytelling, and communal affirmation—practices that form identity and sustain hope.[122] Curated gatherings embody these dynamics in culturally resonant and spiritually rich forms.

This phase includes:

- Gatherings centered on worship, testimony, storytelling, and communal prayer.
- Periodic in-person Bible study intensives or retreat-style events.
- Ritual practices—communal blessing, anointing, lament, celebration—that reflect Black liturgical tradition.
- Flexible venues, including partnerships with churches, community centers, or local restaurants.

Mari Kim's research demonstrates that hybrid ministry is most effective when embodied gatherings complement digital rhythms, producing relational cohesion and ritual memory.[123]

Phase Four: Launching Community Partnership Initiatives

Phase Four integrates community partnerships into the broader formation model, extending spiritual formation into public witness. James Cone argues that Christian discipleship demands participation in the struggle against injustice and solidarity with marginalized communities.[124] Partnerships with nonprofits and community-based

---

[122] Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 35–40.

[123] Mari Kim, *The Digital Black Church: Theology, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 102–109.

[124] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 19–35.

organizations embody this theological mandate. These partnerships also reflect the vision articulated by Wrencher and Williams, who describe liberating churches as modern hush harbors where communal dignity, justice, and resilience are cultivated.[125]

Phase Five: Forming Accountable and Emotionally Intelligent Leadership Structures

The final phase focuses on leadership structures marked by transparency, accountability, and emotional intelligence. Wrencher and Williams argue that liberating leadership is rooted in mutuality, ethical presence, and shared discernment rather than hierarchical control.[126] This phase develops leadership practices that reflect these commitments.

This phase includes:

- Leadership training in emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and conflict transformation.
- Shared leadership models that distribute authority.
- Clear communication and accountability systems modeled on covenantal leadership.
- A leadership ethos grounded in vulnerability, authenticity, and spiritual maturity.

This structure ensures the ministry's integrity, sustainability, and alignment with its theological commitments.

Summary of the Implementation Plan

The Connections Formation Model integrates digital formation, relational cohorts, embodied gatherings, community partnerships, and accountable leadership to cultivate a spiritually grounded, relationally connected, justice-oriented ministry. This

---

[125] Brandon Wrencher and Venneikia Samantha Williams, Liberating Church: A 21st Century Hush Harbor Manifesto (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 1–5.

[126] Wrencher and Williams, *Liberating Church*, 3–5.

implementation plan honors the historic wisdom of the Black Church while responding to the contemporary realities of Millennials and Gen Z, operationalizing the liberative, communal, and holistic theology at the heart of this project.

Evaluation and Indicators of Success

Evaluating the Connections Formation Model requires an approach that honors the communal, relational, and liberative character of Black ecclesial life. Traditional metrics—such as attendance or program volume—are insufficient for a ministry grounded in dialogical formation, hybrid belonging, justice engagement, and trauma-informed pastoral care. Wrencher and Williams describe the contemporary hush harbor as a space of refuge, discernment, empowerment, and collective healing.[127] This vision shapes the evaluative framework for the model.

Success is organized into five domains:

1. Spiritual formation and theological depth
2. Relational trust and communal belonging
3. Hybrid engagement and digital vitality
4. Community impact and liberative partnership
5. Leadership integrity and organizational health

Each domain reflects empirical findings, Black theological insights, and the model's commitment to wholeness.

Spiritual Formation and Theological Depth

Indicators include:

- Active participation in dialogical Bible studies.
- Evidence of spiritual maturation—greater authenticity, healing, and agency.
- Contextual theological reasoning connecting Scripture to identity, justice, and vocation.
- Growth in communal interpretive practices.

---

[127] Ibid, 1-5.

Spiritual formation nurtures interior freedom and the courage to live with integrity, providing a theological benchmark for evaluation.[128]

Relational Trust and Communal Belonging

Indicators include:

- Participant testimony describing safety, belonging, and emotional support.
- Relational connections formed across digital and embodied spaces.
- Engagement in relational cohorts marked by vulnerability and accountability.
- Expressions of mutual care and responsibility.

Belonging emerges through the sacred act of beholding one another with dignity and presence, offering a relational criterion for evaluating community health.[129]

Hybrid Engagement and Digital Vitality

Indicators include:

- Consistent participation in virtual gatherings.
- Quality of digital engagement measured by contribution, not attendance.
- Digital rhythms that reflect pastoral presence and care.
- Participant affirmation that digital spaces are spiritually meaningful and emotionally safe.

Digital Black church spaces function as legitimate sites of formation and pastoral presence, guiding evaluation in this domain.[130]

Community Impact and Liberative Partnership

Indicators include:

• Establishing partnerships with nonprofits, schools, and community organizations.
• Meaningful participation of ministry members—especially young adults—in service or advocacy.
• Community feedback indicating trust and collaboration.
• Tangible outcomes such as improved resource access or mentorship networks.

---

[128] Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 43–45.
[129] Riley, *Black Liturgies*, 3–10.
[130] Kim, *The Digital Black Church*, 102–109.

Christian witness confront injustice and cultivate human flourishing—shaping how community impact is assessed.[131]

Leadership Integrity and Organizational Health

Indicators include:

- Leaders practicing emotional maturity, humility, and relational presence.
- Clear communication processes and accountability systems.
- Shared leadership models that distribute responsibility.
- Participant trust reflected through engagement and feedback.

Leadership grounded in transparency, accountability, and mutuality are essential to liberating ministry environments.[132]

Summary of Evaluation Practices

This evaluation framework reflects a holistic, liberative understanding of ministry success. By centering spiritual formation, belonging, hybrid engagement, justice-oriented partnerships, and leadership integrity, the model evaluates ministry according to the historic wisdom of the Black Church while addressing contemporary needs of Millennials and Gen Z.

Reflections on Ministry Prototypes Already Tested

The Connections Formation Model was developed through prototypes implemented, observed, and refined across multiple ministry contexts. These prototypes—interactive Bible studies, hybrid gatherings, youth mentoring, pastoral accompaniment, and embodied gatherings—functioned as practical laboratories for discerning how Millennials and members of Gen Z engage formation shaped by authenticity, relational depth, and justice-oriented community.

---

[131] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 19–35.
[132] Wrencher and Williams, *Liberating Church*, 3–5.

Interactive Bible Studies as Dialogical Formation

Interactive Bible studies centered dialogical engagement and de-centered pastoral authority, allowing participants to interpret Scripture collaboratively. Such shared discernment is a hallmark of liberating church communities that were shaped by hush harbor imagination.[133] These prototypes revealed theological depth, emotional honesty, and communal validation.

Hybrid Ecclesiology and Digital Belonging

Digital gatherings consistently functioned as accessible and relationally safe spaces. Participants across cities engaged more consistently online than in traditional settings. Kim affirms that digital ministry can function as a spiritually meaningful site for Black Christians navigating trauma and distrust.[134] Digital spaces emerged as modern hush harbors—flexible, decentralized, and spiritually generative.

Holistic Youth Mentoring and Community Engagement

Mentoring prototypes integrated spiritual development with economic literacy, vocational imagination, and leadership skills. Participants expressed that mentoring addressed gaps in their own formation and offered meaningful opportunities for leadership and service. In many cases, mentoring became a two-way street where healing took place as much for the mentors as it did for the mentees.

Embodied Gatherings as Ritual and Relational Anchors

Embodied gatherings—meals, worship, storytelling, testimony—served as relational and ritual anchors. Black worship shapes identity through communal

---

[133] Wrencher and Williams, *Liberating Church*, 1–5.
[134] Kim, *The Digital Black Church*, 102–109

expression, celebration, and lament.[135] These prototypes demonstrated that hybrid ministry thrives when digital rhythms are complemented by embodied ritual.

Pastoral Accompaniment and Trauma-Informed Presence

Pastoral accompaniment offered one-on-one presence, care, and relational support. Wrencher and Williams describe liberating pastoral ministry as grounded in mutuality, ethical presence, and shared responsibility.[136] Participants affirmed that such leadership builds trust and cultivates emotional and spiritual safety.

Lessons Learned from Prototypes

The prototypes revealed six consistent insights:

1. Dialogical learning enhances engagement and theological depth.
2. Digital gathering is spiritually meaningful and accessible.
3. Holistic formation resonates deeply with younger adults.
4. Embodied gatherings provide relational warmth and ritual grounding.
5. Leadership must be accountable, emotionally intelligent, and collaborative.
6. Community engagement strengthens credibility and embodies justice.

These insights validate the model and clarify its future direction.

Summary

The prototypes implemented across varied contexts demonstrate that the Connections Formation Model is both viable and responsive to contemporary needs arising in the Black community. The prototypes affirmed the value of dialogical interpretation, hybrid belonging, holistic mentoring, trauma-informed care, and embodied community. These elements reflect the liberative, relational, and spiritually grounded commitments at the heart of the ministry model and offer a tested foundation for its continued implementation.

---

[135] Moss, *Blue Note Preaching*, 35–40.
[136] Wrencher and Williams, *Liberating Church*, 3–5.

Conclusion

The Connections Formation Model represents a theologically grounded, contextually responsive, and practically tested approach to ministry for Millennials and Gen Zers. Rooted in the liberative currents of the Black theological tradition and informed by contemporary scholarship, the model embodies a vision of church as a space of refuge, critical reflection, communal belonging, and transformative justice. The preceding sections have demonstrated that ministry in the current landscape must be relational, dialogical, hybrid in form, holistic in scope, and grounded in transparent, accountable leadership. These commitments arise directly from the empirical findings examined in earlier chapters and reflect the aspirations and needs of the participants who contributed their experiences to this study.

At the theological core of this model is the conviction that the contemporary Black Church must reclaim the ethos of the hush harbor: decentral, Spirit-led communities shaped by mutual care, liberative imagination, and collective resilience. This vision aligns with the data's clear indication that younger adults gravitate toward communities that prioritize authenticity, integrity, and spiritual depth over institutional performance. The ministry prototypes explored in this chapter affirmed that such communities are both necessary and possible when formation is practiced through dialogical engagement, relational trust, hybrid belonging, and embodied celebration.

The implementation plan provides the practical scaffolding through which this theological vision becomes lived reality. By integrating digital formation, relational cohorts, embodied gatherings, community partnerships, and shared leadership, the plan offers a sustainable structure for cultivating a liberative and spiritually nourishing

community. Likewise, the evaluative framework ensures that the ministry remains accountable to its mission by prioritizing indicators such as spiritual maturation, communal belonging, hybrid engagement, community impact, and leadership integrity. Together, these components reflect a practical theology that is grounded in lived experience, shaped by justice, and oriented toward personal and communal flourishing.

The Connections Formation Model also offers implications for broader ministry contexts. First, it demonstrates that hybrid ministry models can create spiritually meaningful and relationally rich communities when digital and embodied practices are integrated rather than siloed. Second, it affirms that holistic formation—particularly those aspects addressing emotional health, economic empowerment, and community engagement—is essential for younger generations navigating complex social landscapes. Third, it underscores the need for leadership that is transparent, emotionally intelligent, and collaborative. These insights extend beyond this ministry's setting and provide guidance for churches seeking to reimagine their role in a rapidly changing world.

Ultimately, the findings and practices embedded in this model point to a deeper theological truth: liberating Christian community emerges wherever people gather with honesty, hope, and shared commitment to God’s justice. In this way, the Connections Formation Model embodies a contemporary expression of the Black Church’s enduring legacy—integrating spiritual depth, communal care, and social transformation. As the ministry continues to grow and adapt, the model provides a foundation for ongoing discernment, faithful innovation, and liberative Christian witness in the years to come.

CHAPTER SIX

FINAL REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This final chapter offers an integrative reflection on the project's findings, theological insights, and practical contributions. It synthesizes the major themes identified throughout the study, draws implications for ministry and scholarship, acknowledges the project's limitations, and offers recommendations for future research and practice. It concludes with a pastoral reflection on the personal transformation that emerged through this work. The purpose of this chapter is not to repeat what has already been said but to interpret the significance of the project as a whole and to situate it within broader movements of ministry and theological imagination.

Summary of Key Findings

The research revealed that Millennials and Gen Zers are not disengaged from faith; rather, they are searching for communities that embody authenticity, relational trust, emotional intelligence, and spiritual depth. Participants expressed a desire for spaces where questions are welcomed, leaders are accountable, and community is grounded in honesty, vulnerability, and mutual respect. Concerns about institutional hierarchy, opaque decision-making, and performative religiosity contributed to disengagement from traditional church structures—not a rejection of the Christian faith itself.

These insights align with broader national trends. The 2021 Pew Research Center study "Faith Among Black Americans" found that younger Black adults remain spiritually open but express discomfort with institutions that lack transparency, fail to

address systemic injustice, or do not cultivate meaningful belonging.[137] This project's data echoes that finding: adults ages 18–45 want communities where leadership is trustworthy, belonging is tangible, and spiritual formation addresses the complexities of contemporary life.

Participants also revealed a strong preference for hybrid engagement. Digital spaces provided safety, accessibility, and consistency, while embodied gatherings offered ritual grounding, communal warmth, and relational presence. The research demonstrated that hybrid participation is not a compromise but a meaningful ecclesial strategy for younger adults whose lives span multiple contexts.

Overall, the findings indicate a desire for communities that integrate holistic formation, relational integrity, justice-centered ministry, hybrid belonging, and accountable leadership—elements that form the foundation of the Connections Formation Model.

Acknowledging Thriving Congregations and the Importance of Nuance

While this project highlights the widespread disengagement of younger generations from traditional Black Church structures, it is essential to acknowledge that decline is not universal. Across the country, numerous Black congregations—both historic and emerging—continue to thrive, innovate, and attract Millennials and Generation Z. Their success does not undermine the ministry problem; rather, it clarifies it.

[137] Pew Research Center, "Faith Among Black Americans" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021), 12–15.

These congregations often embody many of the practices proposed in this ministry model: relational and conversational engagement, shared leadership, embodied and Spirit-filled worship, intentional community formation, and strategic integration of digital platforms. These concepts are not new, and in many ways embody how the Black Church has always been. By recognizing these thriving ministries, this project affirms that decline is not inevitable. The Black Church possesses within its own tradition the theological, cultural, and spiritual resources necessary for renewal. The success of these congregations strengthens the core argument of this study by demonstrating what becomes possible when churches adapt in ways that honor their heritage while responding faithfully to contemporary realities.

Clarifying the Target Audience: Disaffected Millennials and Gen Z

For clarity, this project uses the term "disaffected Millennials and Generation Z" to describe younger adults who were raised within, exposed to, or adjacent to the Black Church but have become disconnected from regular participation. This disaffection typically emerges from experiences of perceived irrelevance, lack of authenticity, unmet spiritual needs, institutional mistrust, or the absence of meaningful community. The term does not refer to all Millennials or Gen Z young adults within the Black community—many remain deeply committed to thriving congregations. Rather, the focus is on the growing segment of younger adults who maintain belief in God, desire spiritual grounding, and value community, yet no longer find the church to be a viable or compelling spiritual home.

Millennials and Generation Z: Shared Commitments, Distinct Formations

While Millennials and Generation Z share experiences of institutional mistrust, spiritual curiosity, and a desire for authenticity, this study recognizes meaningful distinctions between the two cohorts that shape their engagement with the Black Church. Millennials, many of whom came of age during the expansion of digital technology and the economic instability following the Great Recession, often express frustration with institutional rigidity and unmet promises of stability, particularly when churches appear disconnected from justice, vocation, and holistic life concerns. Generation Z, by contrast—particularly those age eighteen and older who are the focus of this study—has been formed within an environment of digital nativity, heightened mental health awareness, and sustained exposure to social, political, and racial trauma. As a result, Gen Z participants demonstrated heightened sensitivity to emotional safety, relational credibility, and authenticity, frequently evaluating churches less by tradition or denominational loyalty and more by perceived integrity, inclusivity, and responsiveness to lived experience. These distinctions reflect broader generational research identifying Gen Z as more psychologically vulnerable, digitally immersed, and skeptical of institutions than previous cohorts, underscoring the need for ministry approaches that account for differing formative conditions rather than assuming a uniform "young adult" experience.[138]

[138] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 1–12.

Clarifying the Gen Z Cohort Addressed in This Study

It is also important to specify the segment of Generation Z considered in this research. Because a significant portion of Gen Z remains under the age of eighteen, this project focuses on older Gen Z individuals—generally ages 18 to 26—who are developmentally positioned to make independent decisions regarding faith and church participation. These young adults are no longer influenced solely by parental expectations or the structures of youth ministry. Their patterns of engagement or disengagement reflect autonomous choices shaped by their lived experiences, cultural context, and spiritual exploration. By narrowing the focus to this older Gen Z subset, the project avoids conflating adolescent development with adult religious decision-making and ensures that the proposed ministry model responds to the needs of those actively navigating early adulthood, identity, belonging, and spiritual formation.

Theological and Practical Implications

The theological implications of this project are grounded in a vision of Christian community shaped by belonging, liberation, and shared life. Willie James Jennings argues in *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* that Christian formation has too often been shaped by a logic of mastery, possession, and hierarchical control—distorting the gospel's call to communion and mutuality.[139] His critique illuminates the need for ministries that cultivate relational belonging, resist domination, and form people toward shared life.

---

[139] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 6–12.

This theological lens helps interpret the findings. Younger adults resist models of church that center power, performance, and institutional self-preservation. They are drawn to communities where leadership is humble, transparent, and collaborative. The findings of this study suggest that such expectations require what may be described as adaptive leadership. Participants consistently evaluated leadership credibility not by charisma, positional authority, or institutional longevity, but by transparency, moral consistency, and relational trust. This aligns with Marvin McMickle's insistence that prophetic leadership demands moral coherence and the capacity to interpret social realities faithfully, as well as adaptive leadership theory's emphasis on mobilizing communities to address complex challenges that cannot be resolved through technical authority alone.[140] In this context, leadership functions less as control over religious space and more as the facilitation of communal discernment.

The implications for ministry are therefore profound: congregations must cultivate spaces where dignity is affirmed, agency is honored, and communal discernment is central. Jennings' emphasis on belonging invites ministries to prioritize relational trust, shared vulnerability, and interdependence as essential aspects of discipleship.

Practically, this means reimagining formation as dialogical rather than didactic, integrating justice as a core dimension of Christian witness, and developing leadership structures marked by emotional maturity and accountability. Hybrid ecclesiology emerges not as a pragmatic necessity but as a theological opportunity to extend belonging

---

[140] McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, 3.

across physical and digital thresholds. Holistic formation—including spiritual, emotional, economic, and relational dimensions—becomes essential for ministering to contemporary Black adults navigating trauma, social pressures, systemic injustice, and spiritual longing.

Contributions to Ministry Practice and Scholarship

This project contributes meaningfully to both ministry practice and practical theology. First, it introduces a hybrid ministry model that integrates dialogical formation, digital belonging, embodied gatherings, and community partnership—demonstrating how these elements can work together to cultivate spiritual depth and relational trust. Second, it offers a liberative approach to discipleship informed by contemporary Black theological insight and responsive to the lived experiences of younger adults.

Third, it advances conversations about leadership in Black church contexts by emphasizing emotional intelligence, ethical integrity, and shared authority as essential components of pastoral practice. Fourth, it contributes empirical insight into how adults ages 18–45 understand church disengagement—not as a spiritual deficit but as a response to institutional harm or relational breakdown.

Finally, the project provides a replicable framework for ministry innovation. The Connections Formation Model and its phases of implementation offer congregations a practical roadmap for cultivating belonging, justice, holistic formation, and hybrid engagement.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations shape the scope of this project. The study draws from a modest sample size, and participants represent specific geographic and cultural contexts. While the insights are valuable, they may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences within the

broader Black Christian community. The ministry prototypes were implemented at formative stages, limiting the ability to measure long-term outcomes or broader impact.

Additionally, the project reflects the theological commitments and pastoral identity of a specific minister, which may influence interpretation. Hybrid ministry practices examined in this study were shaped by post-pandemic realities and may evolve as technological and cultural contexts shift. These limitations clarify the boundaries of the study without diminishing its significance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several avenues warrant further exploration. Future studies could examine how hybrid ecclesiologies function in diverse congregational contexts or measure long-term spiritual formation outcomes in dialogical learning environments. Research could explore how Jennings' belonging-centered framework shapes pastoral care practices, congregational life, and leadership formation.

Further study might examine how emotional intelligence and trauma-informed leadership impact congregational trust, especially among younger adults. Comparative research across denominations or regions could shed light on broader trends in Black church engagement. Additionally, the integration of justice-oriented ministry, community partnership, mental health support, and economic empowerment within formation models warrants deeper academic attention.

Future research may explore how AI tools can support pastors and small ministries by easing everyday administrative pressures and helping leaders prepare with greater clarity and efficiency. For congregations with limited staff or bi-vocational pastors, AI has the potential to create needed margin for deeper relational and spiritual

care. Because the Connections Formation Model reduces barriers of space, AI may also help ministries reach wider audiences and meet people where they are—offering accessible pathways to connection and spiritual growth beyond physical boundaries.

Recommendations for Local Church Practice

The findings from this study offer guidance for congregations seeking to engage adults ages 18–45 more effectively. Churches should cultivate dialogical spaces for scriptural interpretation, allowing participants to explore biblical texts collaboratively. Hybrid ecclesiology should be embraced as a meaningful form of gathering that enhances accessibility and inclusion.

Congregations should integrate holistic formation that addresses emotional wellness, community engagement, and economic empowerment. Leadership structures must reflect accountability, empathy, and humility. Ministries should pursue justice-oriented partnerships that connect spiritual formation with local community needs. Finally, churches must cultivate spaces where authenticity is welcomed, dignity is protected, and spiritual belonging is nurtured.

Pastoral and Personal Transformation

This project reshaped my understanding of ministry as a practice of belonging, vulnerability, and liberation. Engaging Jennings' theological vision deepened the conviction that leadership must resist hierarchy and embrace relational presence, emotional maturity, and shared discernment. The project renewed my appreciation for the creativity, resilience, and spiritual depth of adults ages 18–45 and clarified the urgency of creating communities where their voices are honored and their experiences are valued.

This work also strengthened my commitment to cultivating liberative Christian community—one that embodies hope, justice, and relational wholeness. It also fostered deeper awareness of the spiritual and emotional labor required for sustaining this kind of ministry.

Final Conclusion

This project has argued that the disengagement of Black Millennials and Generation Z must be understood within the broader current cultural moment—a convergence of social, economic, political, technological, and spiritual forces reshaping how community, authority, and belonging are experienced. Rather than signaling a loss of faith, this moment reveals a generation discerning where authenticity, dignity, and shared life are genuinely embodied. When read theologically, these conditions do not represent a crisis of relevance alone, but an invitation for the Black Church to reclaim its adaptive, communal, and liberative vocation in ways that speak faithfully to contemporary realities.

In response, this study demonstrates that hybrid, relational, and liberative ministry models offer meaningful pathways for engaging Black Millennials and Gen Zers. The Connections Formation Model embodies a contemporary expression of Black ecclesial imagination, integrating dialogical formation, digital belonging, holistic mentoring, justice-oriented partnerships, and shared leadership. These practices respond directly to the needs articulated by participants in this project.

Ultimately, this study affirms that the future of Christian community depends not on preserving institutional forms but on cultivating spaces of belonging, liberation, and communal life. Guided by contemporary Black theology and informed by lived

experience, this project offers a vision for ministry capable of nurturing transformation, strengthening relationships, and embodying the liberating love of God in the twenty-first century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen-McLaurin, Lisa. *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021.

Banks, Adelle. "Black Church, Via Phones and Facebook, Bridging Digital Divide Amid COVID-19." Religion News Service, April 30, 2020.

Boddie, Stephanie Clintonia. "How Philadelphia's Black Churches Overcame Disease, Depression, and Civil Strife." Pennsylvania Capital-Star, 2024.

Boddie, Stephanie C., and Jerry Z. Park. "Racializing the Religious during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Religions* 12, no. 341 (2021): 1–10.

Carswell, Wayne R. "Learning to Lament: Complaining to God about the Decline of the Church." *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 1 (2020): 59–70.

Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970.

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

Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975.

Cooper, William P., and Rahul Mitra. "Religious Disengagement and Stigma Management by African-American Young Adults." *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 46, no. 4 (2018): 509–533.

Davis, Jim, and Michael Graham. *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Stand Your Ground*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

Evans, James H., Jr. *We Have Been Believers*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Evans, Tony. *A Survey of the Black Church in America*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2024.

Floyd-Thomas, Stacey. "Embodied Resistance and the Shape of Black Religious Life." *Journal of Africana Religions* 9, no. 3 (2021): 245–260.

Floyd-Thomas, Stacey, and Juan Floyd-Thomas. *Deeper Shades of Purple*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022.

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Black Church*. New York: Penguin Press, 2021.

Gench, Roger J. *Theology from the Trenches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

Henderson, Alexis. “The Black Church, the Younger Generation, and the Unchurched.” *Journal of Black Religious Thought* (2024).

Herzog, Patricia Snell, and Erin F. Johnston. “Religious Change and Generational Shifts Among Black Millennials and Gen Z.” *Sociology of Religion* 82, no. 4 (2021): 477–499.

Hewitt, Roderick R. “The Church as Christ’s Broken Body Responding…” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–8.

Hotz, Kendra, and Caryn Riswold. “Black Religious Diversity and the Formation of Contemporary Faith Communities.” *Practical Matters Journal* 13 (2020): 1–22.

Hunt, C. Anthony. *I’ve Seen the Promised Land*. Nashville: Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2020.

Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020.

Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Jones, Nona. From Social Media to Social Ministry. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.

Kim, Mari. The Digital Black Church. New York: Routledge, 2023.

McGhee, Heather. The Sum of Us. New York: One World, 2021.

McMickle, Marvin A. Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Moss, Otis III. Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

Perry, Andre M., and Darrick Hamilton. *Know Your Price*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020.

Pew Research Center. *Religion and Public Life Studies*. Various reports, 2010–2024.

Pierce, Yolanda. *In My Grandmother’s House*. Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021.

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion*. Updated edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Ray, Rashawn, and William Darity Jr. “Race, COVID-19, and the Future of Black Communities.” *Du Bois Review* 18, no. 2 (2021): 1–23.

Larry Reid Live. Facebook page. Accessed October 25, 2025. https://www.facebook.com/LarryReidLive.

Riley, Cole Arthur. *Black Liturgies*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2022.

Shellnutt, Kate. “Black Millennials and Gen Z Becoming More Cynical Toward Christian Identity.” *Christianity Today*, April 15, 2021. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/04/black-gen-z-millennial-christian-church-trends-barna/.

Shelton, Jason E. *The Contemporary Black Church*. New York: NYU Press, 2024.

Sit, Tyler. *Staying Awake*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021.

Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. London: SCM Press, 2016.

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

Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2017.

Turman, Eboni Marshall. *Black Womanist Ethics and the Disruptive Power of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Turman, Eboni Marshall. *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Jean M. Twenge, iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 1–12.

Warnock, Raphael G. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.

Wrencher, Brandon, and Venneikia Samantha Williams. *Liberating Church*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

APPENDIX A

Visuals and Summary Tables

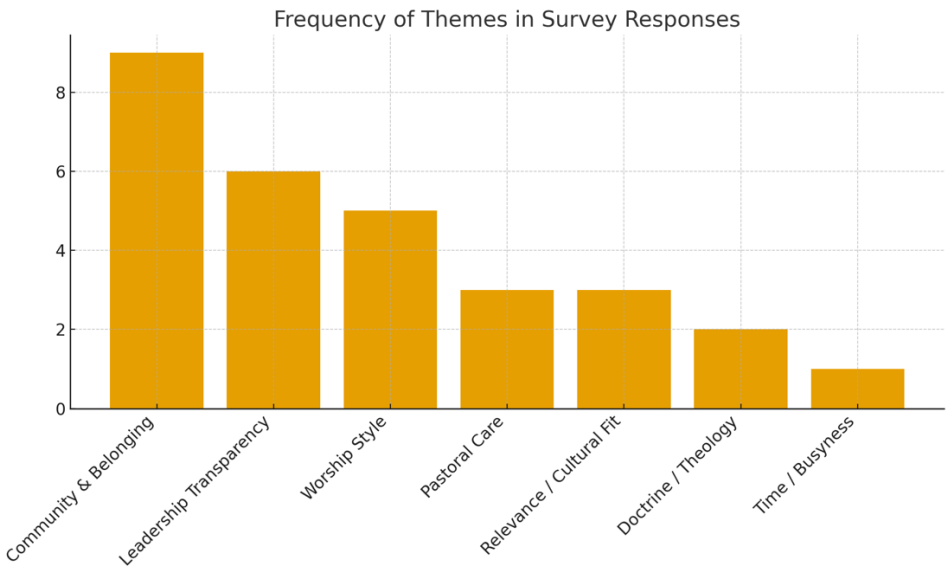

Figure A.1. Frequency of Themes in Survey Responses

Table A.1. Frequency of Themes in Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Frequency	Interpretation
Community & Belonging	9	Respondents emphasized relationships, connection, and meaningful community.
Leadership Transparency	6	Comments referenced trust, honesty, and accountability in leadership.
Worship Style	5	Mixed concerns about music, service format, and worship expression.
Pastoral Care	3	Desire for emotional, spiritual, and relational support.
Relevance / Cultural Fit	3	Comments pointed to generational and cultural disconnection.
Doctrine / Theology	2	Doctrinal disagreements were infrequent.
Time / Busyness	1	Scheduling and time-related barriers were rarely mentioned.

Table A.2. Summary of Findings, Interpretation, and Implications

Finding	Interpretation (Practical Theology)	Implications for Ministry Practice
Declining institutional commitment but persistent spiritual curiosity	Faith remains alive, but existing ecclesial forms feel disconnected from lived experience.	Rebuild discipleship models that are relational, conversational, and experiential.
Younger adults seek ongoing community, not episodic fellowship	Community must reflect God's relational nature and honor embodied presence and dignity.	Shift from programmatic fellowship to relational ecosystems (small groups, care circles, relational cohorts).
Leadership credibility is a decisive factor in engagement	Trust, transparency, and authenticity are theological issues of witness, not merely administrative concerns.	Increase accountability structures, transparent decision-making, and emotionally intelligent leadership formation.
Digital spaces function as legitimate environments for spiritual formation	Online spaces serve as real sites of pastoral care, community, and spiritual exploration.	Develop hybrid ecclesiologies and integrate digital discipleship ecosystems (content + community + care).
Discipleship models rooted in consumption are ineffective	Formation emerges from reflective engagement with lived experience, not from hierarchical instruction.	Implement dialogical, narrative-based, and embodied discipleship practices.
Organizational culture significantly impacts spiritual trust	Ministry systems communicate theological commitments; unhealthy systems distort witness.	Reform governance, communication processes, and evaluation systems to reflect shared leadership and clarity.
Generational differences in communal expectations	Lived experience shapes the meaning of "community"; churches must hold multiple communal expressions.	Create intergenerational spaces that honor diverse expectations while cultivating mutual dignity.
Desire for integrated community beyond Sunday gathering	Participants express a theology of belonging that exceeds traditional ecclesial rhythms.	Expand community life into weekly rhythms, digital connections, and embodied practices of care.