BRIDGING A GAP:

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES

IN

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Advisor: Laurel Kearns, Ph.D.

Dawrell G. Rich

Drew University

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ABSTRACT

BRIDGING THE GAP: THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Dawrell G. Rich

At the intersection of black church studies, environmental justice, and critical urban studies, this dissertation aims to fill a lacunae created by scholars in these fields by expanding scholarship on urban black church environmentalism. The role of black churches in urban environmental justice has been overlooked in black church studies and urban environmental justice studies. This gap perpetuates a narrative that black Christian congregations have not taken seriously environmental issues that disproportionately affect their communities and wellness. Thus, this project seeks to fill the gap in the literature by providing a snapshot of predominately black U.S. congregations working to address socio-contextual environmental injustice issues like food insecurity, sustainability, and water, soil, and air pollution to build healthy communities for people of color.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my beloved uncle, Dr. Niathan "Nate" Allen, Ph.D., whose distinguished career in community and economic development - as Executive Director of the Henry Street Settlement (New York, NY), head of the church rebuilding program of the Congress of National Black Churches (Atlanta, GA), and Director of Housing and Economic Development at the City of Newark (Newark, NJ) - provided a roadmap for my academic and professional pursuits. I never imagined I would have to complete this journey without you by my side. However, I sense your presence with me. I love and miss you immensely.

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aspire to do at large. Words cannot express the depth of respect I have for each of you and gratitude for the past eight years of scholarly dialogue. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

At the National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit held in Washington, D.C., in 1993, a contingent of mainline leaders from predominantly black denominations endorsed an agenda linking environmental issues, racism, civil rights, and economic justice. They focused on local and immediate environmental concerns affecting black communities yet did not forsake the impacts of the global environmental crisis on developing countries and the disproportionate burden they bear due to climate change and environmental racism. Therefore, participants at the summit aimed to shine a light on how black and poor people around the world suffer inordinately due to harmful environmental decisions.

The two-day forum produced the "Black Church Declaration on Environmental and Economic Justice," where they proclaimed, "We, African-American Church leaders, historically committed to justice issues, affirm the unitary nature of life and commit ourselves to the ministry of converging justice and environmental issues that are critical matters of life and death for our Church and for our community" (1993). This quote might come as a surprise to some who maintain that given the array of social issues faced by black communities, black Christian congregations are not interested in environmental issues. This quote - now 30 years old - does not instantiate the beginning of black church environmental activism (discussed below) but it signals that interest in the environment and work to redress unjust policies and practices is held at the top levels of leadership. Therefore, attendees of the forum also asserted, "As leaders in the Black Church, we view climate change as a moral issue and one of the greatest public health challenges of

our time, particularly for black and other marginalized communities. Breathing dirty, carbon-polluted air, that causes climate change contributes to thousands of asthma attacks, hospital visits, and premature deaths every year. Black and lower income communities are often hit the hardest by climate change in the United States" (1993). While not trying to chart the long history of black churches addressing environmental justice issues, this dissertation touches upon much of that history. It points out that 30 years later, there is still a dearth of scholarship on the particular role of black churches in urban environmental justice. Further, it is focused on the task set out in the quote: probing examples of "the ministry of converging justice and environmental issues" as critical matters of life and death for black communities. The examples of black church environmental activism that follow in this dissertation convey how some black church leaders have successfully used this framing to address urban environmental injustice in their communities.

Growing black religious eco-activism has caught the attention of newspapers and news media outlets. Articles like those found in *Christianity Today*, titled "How 1,000 Black Churches Are Caring For the Earth" (Holcomb 2021) and "Black Churches Join a Green Movement" in *Religion & Politics* (Berger 2019), signal the rise of black church environmentalism. From these articles and coverage on news channels like CNN, which featured stories like "How green theology is energizing the black community to fight the climate crisis" (Higgs 2019), we learn that across the country, more black churches are taking back the health of their congregations and neighborhoods from the impacts of poor policies. Yet, it appears that while interest in black church environmentalism has increased, scholarly contributions to black church studies and its intersection with

environmentalism still lag, except for contributions by scholars on the topic like Dianne D. Glave (2010, 2017), Pinn (2001, 2003), Amanda Baugh (2015, 2017, 019) and Apr III and Boeckelman (1997), Elonda Clay (2011), Betancourt (2018, 2022), and Peter Gaal-Szabo (2022) who are helping to elucidate the ongoing black church environmental phenomenon. Additionally, religious environmental activists like Reverend Dr. Gerald L. Durley, pastor emeritus of Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, one of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's lieutenants, and those profiled in this dissertation, have been vocal about calling for black churches to connect faith, civil rights, and climate justice (Durley 2019).

Thus, this dissertation in the sociology of religion and ecology expands the study of urban environmental justice, which has not taken the role of black churches seriously, by urging the moving of black church ecological engagement from the margins to the center of scholarly discourse. I acknowledge the efforts of urban black church scholars such as Diedre Helen Crumbley (2012), Katie Day (2014), and Joseph Tucker-Edmonds (2021), who draw attention to some black Christian congregations' work in urban centers but do not address urban environmental injustice specifically. Yet, in response to unjust environmental practices that disproportionately impact black communities, more scholarly research is needed on urban black church environmentalism. To do this, I turned to black church studies, where I also found that a gap exists. Since its inception, black church studies have grown to include community and economic development (Littlefield 2005; Floyd-Thomas and Floyd-Thomas 2007; O'Leary et al. 2022) which is widely used to describe social programs and development initiatives led by congregations. These programs often partner with federal agencies in response to a

neighborhood's social, physical, environmental, and economic conditions (Phillips and Pittman 2009). However, more explicit discussion of environmental activism - let alone black church environmentalism - is sidelined. This is the case 30 years after black church leaders called for more response, even though environmental crises are multiplying because of the growing impact of urbanization and climate change. This dissertation names environmental justice alongside community/ economic development since black church leaders - some who are named in my research - are doing just that.

Religions, in all their dimensions, are always shaped in place, and as the world hastens towards increased urbanization, the practice of religions will primarily occur in urban spaces. Where we live, work, play, an unofficial "motto" of the environmental justice movement, and I might add, where we pray, matters because there are racial, economic, and spatial dimensions of urban environmental injustice that have led to uneven proximal health-related diseases like cancer, asthma, and heart disease in communities of color (Wilson, Hutson, and Mujahid 2008; Hutson and Wilson 2011). Historically, black churches established schools, mutual aid societies, community development corporations, credit unions, and other social service programs to address the needs of their communities (Hula 2000; Born et al. 2021). At the same time, as illustrated in the open paragraph of this dissertation, black theologians, church leaders, and environmental activists have long been calling upon black churches to add environmental justice concerns to this list.

Research is needed to bridge that gap because, in underserved and demographically changing neighborhoods, black churches are often among the few institutions that remain that can address increasing environmental threats. They serve as a

community, historical, and cultural repository (Primo 2023). In light of structural disparities, black churches may critique existing macrostructures and give rise to organizations and movements for community sustainability, which I define below (Zuidervaart 2013; Gray 2014). Additionally, black churches have been a source of moral authority charting a pathway towards civil rights and social justice (Ellis 2023; Grzymaa-Busse 2016; Pinn 2013) In expanding the field of urban environmental justice and black church studies, I hope to help present and future black church congregations reclaim their environmental identity and joining Eco-theologians and activists who are doing their part to foreground black environmental activism (for example, Glave 2010, 2017; Harris 2016a, 2017; Betancourt 2018, 2022). Reclaiming black environmental heritage is critical to empowering black people to advocate for their environmental welfare. I aim to center the unique voice and role of exemplary African American Christian congregations in decisions on urban environmental planning and strengthen the foundation to create modern, sustainable communities.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITTIONS

What is a Black Church?

Before going any further, however, it is important to clarify what I mean by black churches. Although the term "black church" can refer to various black Christian expressions, it is used as if what is meant by it is obvious to the reader. As a categorical catch-all, it implies a shared religious expression among all black Christians. However, this flattens black Christian identity into one instantiation and disregards how they have named themselves, and how diverse they are. In an essay written by Marilyn Mellowes, producer of the series *God in America,* she writes:

> The term the black church evolved from the phrase "the Negro church," the title of a pioneering sociological study of African American Protestant churches at the turn of the century by W.E.B. Du Bois. In its origins, the phrase was largely an academic category. Many African Americans did not think of themselves as belonging to "the Negro church," but rather described themselves according to denominational affiliations such as Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and even "Saint" of the Sanctified tradition. (2023)

Mellowes notes the diversity, but baving been absorbed by academic categories, the breadth of African American expressions of Christianity is defined in the rigid term "black church" which emphasizes the racial identity of its constituents as opposed to their denominational affiliations.

For sociologists Lincoln and Mamiya, black churches were defined within the parameters of the seven historic black Protestant denominations: the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Church of God in Christ (1990, 1). While seeming to say that the "black church" is those churches in predominantly black denominations, this definition neglects alternative black Christian traditions that emerged like black holiness and oneness denominations, and a variety of non-denominational churches.

Others define the black church by the worship life and cultural expressions in African American communities. For surveys, who to categorize as members of black churches is critical; thus, in an online essay published for the Pew Research Center, journalist and researcher Adelle M. Banks' definition of black church extends beyond worship life and cultural expression to include "congregations with predominantly Black attendees as well as African American leadership" (2021, para. 6). Similarly, an online

study entitled "Faith Among Black Americans," also published by the Pew Research Center, reported, "Black churches/congregations are those where the respondent said that all or most attendees are Black and the senior religious leaders are Black" (Mohamed, Cox, Diamant, and Gecewicza 2021). This indicates that scholars do not agree on the descriptions of black churches nor how they are defined.

I think a more expansive definition of the term is required in light of the vastness of African Diasporic religious cultural expressions (Floyd-Thomas and Floyd-Thomas 2007). For one, it is more appropriate to always refer to *black churches*, to acknowledge that there is no monolithic "black church." I define black churches as those affiliated with the seven historic black Protestant denominations, and those churches who are not members of the seven, and also exhibit the following: a predominantly black attendance, black senior pastoral leadership, a black liberation theology that reflects the black lived experience and is consciously culturally expressive.[1] I use the term *black churches* to acknowledge a variety of black Christian congregational manifestations including house churches, storefront churches, and the millions of African American Christians who are not affiliated with historically black denominations, and find a home in predominantly white mainline Protestant denominations such as the American Baptist Churches, Disciples of Christ, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (USA), the Congregational church, the Episcopal Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In this project, I use the term black and African American

[1] I recognize that while attempting to expand the definition of black churches, the characteristics exhibited, especially a black liberation theology, may lead to excluding a range of store-front, Holiness and Pentecostal, and independent Baptist churches that have not historically asserted black liberation theology.

churches interchangeably and independent of historical timeframe. I now turn my attention to urban black church environmentalism to explicate how urban environmental justice studies and black church studies stops short of naming the role of urban black congregations for environmental justice specifically.

Urban Black Church Environmentalism

Black church studies include a range of topics: descriptions of the inception of black churches as invisible institutions in the antebellum south to their denominational growth throughout the U.S. (Whelchel Jr. 2011; Andrews 2002); in migration (Drake & Cayton 1993; Crumbley 2012; Weisenfeld 2017); civil rights (Morris 1996; Whelchel Jr. 2011); post-civil rights (Smith 2003; Pinn 2013); the role of black women in black churches (Day 2012; Collier-Thomas 2010; Ross 2003), and multiculturalism (Smith, Ackah, and Reddie 2014). Other works explore the future missiology of black churches but leave out the environment. Such is the case with Reverend Dr. Raphael Warnock's, pastor and United States Senator from (D)Georgia, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church* (2013); though it is noteworthy that the church he led, the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia celebrates Earth Day/Earth Sunday, in partnership with organizations like the Black Church Food Security Network, founded by Reverend Dr. Heber Brown III, which I discuss more in Chapter 3.

Seminal black church studies pieces do not explicitly name how environmental justice and its sub-themes like inadequate access to healthy food, poor transportation systems, air, water, and soil pollution, unsafe and unaffordable housing, and community sustainability shape the lives of congregants (Mitchell 2004; Floyd-Thomas and Floyd-Thomas 2007; Pollard and Duncan et al. 2016). A search of the indexes of these multi-

authored collections reveals no mention of environmental concerns per se; although authors, like Harold Dean Trulear, and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs - contributors to Pollard and Duncan's *Reader* - describe some black churches'community development responses to urban social conditions. Scholars situated in other academic fields, like professor of political science, William Arp III (1997); professor of ethics, Theodore Walker (2004); Eileen M. Smith-Cavros (2006), professor of sociology; and Amanda Baugh (2015, 2017; 2019), professor of religion and environment, have contributed to academic interest in black church environmentalism specifically. Expanding black church studies to include an urban environmental justice framework, may shed light on short- and long-term efforts of black churches in their fight for community sustainability.

Scholars like Glave (2010) and Harris (2017) are noteworthy in the discussion on black religious ecological engagement because they disrupt prevailing narratives of black environmental disengagement. In light of the dearth described in the previous paragraph, my project brings together siloed conversations about urban environmental justice on the one hand and African American churches on the other. I shine a light on some black congregations who are responding to increasing urban demands to foster an alternative vision for community sustainability in light of unjust practices levied by local, state, and federal agencies. I offer urban black church environmentalism as a corrective to the relative neglect of both urban environmental justice and black church studies relative neglect, while recognizing that not all black religious environmentalism is church-based, and that not all black churches exist in urban spaces.

Though the majority of black people who live in the U.S. reside in urban or suburban areas (about equal amounts), only 18% describe themselves as living in rural

areas (Cox and Tamir 2022). Thus, I acknowledge the diversity of places black folk make home - rural, urban, and suburban settings. Just as there is no singular black church, there is no geographically bound black church. Instead, African Americans and their churches exist in various areas. This dissertation, for a multitude of reasons, has chosen to focus on churches in urban areas, but it does not equate black with urban, a frequent trope in many discussions. I do not seek to conflate the black churches to the urban phenomena exclusively. However, I do note that while the black church finds its roots in the African forest (DuBois 1903), and more rural origins under enslavement, it did not/does not stay there. The great migration (1870-1970) drove many expressions of black Christianity from the rural south to the urban north and transformed how some black congregations responded to the social needs of black migrants (Sernett 1997; Wilkerson 2010),[2] of which more will be said in Chapter 1. The churches I include in this dissertation represent the evolution of black churches in addressing urban environmental issues germane to urban black communities.

Urbanization, which challenges access to resources like parks, green space, clean air, affordable housing, and quality foods, warrants an investigation of the church's role in mediating improved public health since, historically, it was the epicenter of black social life and today, some black churches are positioning themselves to address urban

[2] For the past 50 years, a "New Great Migration" has occurred as northern blacks move south. According to the Brookings Institute, a nonprofit organization that conducts nonpartisan research, young, college-educated blacks have contributed to the exponential rise of southern urban metropolises like Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas and Houston. The out-migration from northern states has also contributed to church decline. To learn more see: Frey, William. "A 'New Great Migration' Is Bringing Black Americans Back to the South" September 12, 2022. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-great-migration-is-bringing-black-americans-back-to-the-south/.

issues. Urban environmental themes and sub themes have long been a concern of many black churches; however, bringing in explicit environmental issues, broadens the scope of their social involvement. Often, black congregations' role in environmental justice is labeled as community development or overlooked altogether. This may be due to white narratives that dominate conversations about the environment so that it is perceived as a white issue, and a historical gap in environmental and community economic development planning (Capria 2013; Harley and Scandrett 2019). The bifurcation of environmental and community and economic development resulted in limited discursive treatment (Collin, Beatley, and Harris 1995; Haughton 2013). Yet, increased awareness of the impact they have on one another has led to expanded scholarship that includes the environment within the community development framework (Jayachandran 2022; Noll and Bahr 2023). More will be said of black church community development and environmentalism.

This project disputes the stereotype that black religiosity does not include a concern for the environment, given the pressing social problems in black communities. An article by freelance journalist Willy Blackmore states, with respect to the climate crisis, "The Black church is not generally fulfilling that long-standing role as the first stop for solutions" (2023) with respect to the climate crisis. Blackmore draws his conclusion from a report published by the Public Religion Research Institute, an independent research organization, which indicated that 59% of black Protestants believe climate change is caused by human activity (PRRI 2023). However, a Pew Research Center survey offered more positive connections between race, religion, and the environment - not climate change specifically. According to their survey, 86% of

historically black Protestants believed they had a duty to protect the Earth (Reem 2022). The contrasting data may signal nuanced environmental concerns among blacks than some like Blackmore put forward. Additionally, nuances in questions concerning climate change – whether one believes in climate change versus religious duty to protect the earth may contribute to the contrasting results.

Professor of sociology and religion, Laurel Kearns, has described how survey data, at times, contradicts people's environmental sentiments, in part because of how the questions are asked, noting how some of her encounters with black congregants have shown deep engagement in environmental issues (2002). A more expanded look at black church environmentalism is needed than what survey data show - especially in light of ongoing urbanization.[3] I recognize the historical realities are that environmental injustice has no geographical boundaries and some rural communities have experienced environmental hazards too. Yet, I focus on the urban context because the scale of urbanization means intensified vulnerability of black communities to issues of public health named in this dissertation (i.e. unsustainable housing, food insecurity, and air, water, and soil pollution). I now turn to briefly describe the relationship between religious institutions like black churches and the city.

[3] In centering some urban black church responses to environmental injustice, this does not negate the fact that some rural black churches, too, like the Conetoe Baptist Church (CBC) and Mount Zion AME Church (MZBC) in Rocky Mount and Delway, North Carolina respectively, have a role in environmental activism. Through its affiliate, Conetoe Family Life Center, CBC, launched a food production and distribution program. MZBC is addressing toxic groundwater caused by a nearby hog farm. Religion as a social phenomenon is not limited to its expression in urban settings but are found in rural areas, where it may play an even stronger role in defining community and activism.

BLACK CHURCHES: JUST ENOUGH FOR THE CITY

Drawing upon Stevie Wonder's 1973 classic song, *Living for the City*, which, when released, was a social commentary on migration, homelessness, structural racism, and environmental pollution, we might illustrate the potential role of black churches in city contexts. Stevie sang:

> He spends his life walking the streets of New York City/He's almost dead from breathing in air pollution/ He tried to vote, but to him there's no solution/ Living just enough, just enough for the city

The song portrays the harsh realities some migrants met as they settled in northern urban centers. However, for many African Americans, some urban black churches were a resource of financial, food, and job support (Crumbley 2012). I will say more about how this came to be and the role of black churches in migration in Chapter 1.

Today, some African American Christian congregations take seriously the social, environmental, and material conditions of their neighborhoods through various programs. In their way, they are addressing social conditions that negatively affect black health and well-being. Their efforts point to the last stanza of the song as Wonder's voice can be heard through the chaos of the music proclaiming,

> I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow/
>
> And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow

Incorporating racial, economic, and spatial dimensions of urban environmental justice provides a framework for sustainable solutions.

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) brought this point home since social determinants of health like poverty, neighborhood and air quality particulate matter, and race/ethnicity were found to affect COVID-19 outcomes (Abrams 2020). For medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington, the novel coronavirus pandemic was spurred on

by the conflagration of race, poverty, and increased exposure to environmental pollutants. She writes, “It’s true that pathogens are democratic by nature. It’s also true that marginalized minority ethnic groups have increased exposure to environmental pollution and reduced access to health care. All this creates physical and social vulnerabilities that leave people of colour less able to resist and survive infections such as the coronavirus” (2019, 241). These impacts are exacerbated in cities, as Brown, Alick, Heaston, Monestime, and Powe (2022) suggest, however, black churches working with public health organizations may be vehicles of environmental and health crisis intervention. More will be said about this in Chapter 3.

Cities contain physical and ideological constructions that inhibit or enhance human flourishing. Cities are where political, cultural, and social ideologies converge to produce an urban phenomenon - a collection of features (i.e., streets, traffic, density, restaurants, and buildings) - and are identified by scale and size. Cities are social spaces where human relationships are negotiated, and these social arrangements take shape in forms (Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991; Simmel 1997; Massey, Allen, and Pile 1999; Small and Adler 2019). David Harvey, professor of anthropology and geography, states that the physical manifestation of urban centers, which is shaped by architecture and planning, “is symbolic of our culture, symbolic of the existing social order, symbolic of our aspirations, our needs, and our fears” (1973, 31). Religious institutions, like black churches, contribute to the architecture, planning, and development of cities and thus include sacred objects (e.g., religious institutions) that impact the composition and meaning of urban space (Jacobson 2012; Boeck 2013; Manouchehrifar and Forester 2021).

The spatial organization of cities may be a product of religious communities that impose theological conceptions and change the physical landscape. Citing Emile Durkheim, Geel and Beyers (2018) offer that religion as a social phenomenon contributes to the meaning-making of cities and "requests space for diversity and a *habitus* in a world unhindered by pluralism and diversity" (8). That is to say, the city is a place where religion may function as a binding force. Katie Day, professor of religion and society, argues, "Houses of worship contribute to neighborhood aesthetics and identity as they are incorporated into cityscapes, [yet] planners and policy makers have often had a blind spot about the importance of the religious presence" (2021, 279). Because religion and urban planning were seen as independent of each other, practitioners in both fields often neglected the importance of religious presence in the city and the impacts of urban planning and policies on religion (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2013; Day 2020). Nevertheless, religions and their institutions may be tools to negotiate that otherness and mediate socio-environmental and spatial justice.

Expanding the intersection of urban environmental justice and black church studies to include explicit black religious environmentalism reflects ongoing social activism in some black churches and how they are reclaiming their environmental terrain from stereotypes of environmental disengagement. These studies may unlock clues for black community sustainability. For this project, the term *sustainability* is defined by Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans as: "the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (2002, 5). Furthermore, sustainability intersects social equity, economic growth, and environmental protection (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2002,

37). Their definition calls for sustainable practices in land-use planning, building construction, infrastructure, green space, housing development, and just economies that do not privilege one group of people over another. Given its historical role in African American social life and presence in cities, black churches may be vehicles to redress the social ills that Stevie Wonder observed more than 50 years ago to create sustainable communities today.

BLACK CHURCHES AND URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Ongoing urbanization requires us to consider the social and environmental consequences of where people live. How communities are planned, zoned, constructed, and organized is evidence of social stratification, making people of color and the poor expendable. Race as a social construction is weaponized in urban planning and environmental decision-making to constrain people of color from accessing environmental amenities like parks, greenways, and clean air and water. This is especially crucial within city centers that continue to attract people in hopes of increased job access and upward mobility. The breakdown of local ecosystems on account of city expansion is sometimes irreversible. The impacts of increased urbanization affect mental health and well-being — e.g., the often decreased access to quality food, clean water, and affordable and sustainable housing (Srivastava 2009; Hiremath 2021; Ventriglio et al. 2021). Yet, a vision of hope for urban centers may be found, and black churches have a role in creating that hopeful city.

Some black churches are addressing urban environmental injustice through community-led sustainable practices like adequate and affordable housing development that includes “green” features to lower electric and heating costs and to foster community

gardens. Expanded scholarship on black churches engaged in environmental activism should illuminate their potential role in creating healthy cities in light of ongoing urbanization. There is interest in black religious environmentalism, and although scholarship is increasing, I aim to shine the spotlight on the potential benefits for black churches and black church studies as they incorporate an urban environmental justice lens. In this way, black churches may see their role as shapers of the city's ideological, social, and material space.

For example, an article by journalist Phoebe Suy Gibson in *Christianity Today* (2022) chronicled the Lyons Unity Missionary Baptist Church (Houston, Texas) and the Neighborhood Enrichment Xchange - a local community development corporation - and their collaboration to address environmental issues like air and water pollution, and poor drainage in Houston's Fifth Ward, a historically predominately black neighborhood. The environmental issues stemmed from toxins leeched into the soil and water from the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad. Another example, in *the Guardian* (2016), Oliver Milman described how one of the largest and oldest black denominations, the African American Episcopal (AME) church, passed a climate change resolution in 2016, which called for a move from fossil fuels to clean energy. The resolution also urged local church leaders and congregations to act through political engagement and environmental awareness. Stories in the media like these signal black religious and environmental activism at the local and denominational levels. Mark Stoll, professor of history offers, "The centrality of religion to African American environmental activism stands out in strong contrast to other comparable social groups. Despite the examples of Pat Robertson

and Jerry Falwell, no other ethnic, social, or religious group has as strong a tradition of clerical political activism" (2005; 154).

To illuminate the potential of black Christian environmentalism, in this dissertation I explore environmental engagement at Trinity United Church of Christ (Chicago, Illinois), Friendship West Baptist Church (Dallas, Texas), and Pleasant Hope Baptist Church (Baltimore, Maryland) to describe further how some black congregations are addressing harmful socio-environmental conditions to create sustainable communities led by and for black residents. These examples are points of entry into a broader discussion about the uneven environmental burden heaped upon black communities due to the urban phenomenon. According to Lambert Zuidervaart, (professor emeritus of philosophy), religion and its organizations can critique and create societal structures by "challenging the operations of state power" and they "can ask whether the state is in fact achieving public justice for the diverse institutions, communities, and individuals within the states jurisdiction" (2013, 254). In this way, religion and its institutions disturb existing social patterns that do not support equality and serve as an incubator for civil-social patterns that promote fairness.

The churches included in this dissertation have exhibited these qualities insofar as they have resisted environmental injustices in their contexts and created new social patterns. Through community and sustainable development, creative alternative pathways to healthy and affordable foods, and protesting local government-sanctioned unjust polluting practices, these churches are turning the tide of targeted environmental degradation inflicted on communities of color. As Zuidervaart offers, religious communities "can help give birth to artistic, educational, and other organizations and

movements that contribute to cultural, economic, and political change" (2013, 255), which is seen in each of these examples. As mediating structures, black churches have been a source of social and civil progress since their inception in the cauldron of vitriolic white enslavement. Mediating structures, like churches, "provide a linkage between large bureaucratic megastructures and individual citizens," to ensure social services are made available to persons in need (Barber 2015, 256). More will be said about mediating structures in Chapter 6. Black religious activism has long included the environment, as explored below; here, I draw attention to the black churches' efforts to address urban environmental injustices.

A look at the evolution of black churches in the US through black church studies provides a historical framework for their role in civic engagement. It also provides evidence for an important future role in urban environmental activism. In light of ongoing urbanization and its impacts on the natural environment and public health, I describe the potential role of African American churches as agents for black self-reclamation and community sustainability. Some existing environmental practices of urban black churches are provided as examples of context-specific responses. I hope that more black churches may be inspired to see their activism through the lens of urban environmental justice since it may include a structural racism framework that acknowledges historical decisions and the complex network of institutions that limit black health (Corburn 2017).

SITE SÉLECTIONS

An interdisciplinary dialogue between urban environmental justice, defined in a later chapter, and black church studies looks at urban black churches in response to ongoing urbanization (McRoberts 2004, Crumbley 2012, Day 2014, and Garmin 2017). I

look at three relatively successful examples of black churches' diverse approaches to addressing environmental injustice - alongside some others.

- Trinity United Church of Christ (Chicago, Ill) addresses housing sustainability, food insecurity, and energy efficiency through green building, biomimicry, and a 5-acre sustainable urban farm on a former brownfield.
- Friendship-West Baptist Church (Dallas, TX) addresses illegal dumping, air, water, and soil contamination through eco-political engagement, community organizing, and reclaiming local land for green space.
- Pleasant Hope Baptist Church (Baltimore, MD) is addressing food apartheid through its on-site garden, which evolved into a distribution operation and a national network of black churches and farmers who supply food to underserved communities.

These churches have a history of civic engagement, are centered upon liberation theology and justice ideals, and draw upon historical black environmental engagement to support their eco-related activities. However, they are not the only illustrations throughout the U.S.

I selected these churches based on their predominantly African American congregational makeup, urban location, black senior pastoral leadership, a theology that reflects the black lived experience, and they are consciously culturally expressive. Additional criteria are that they explicitly engaged in environmental activism, held a unique position and history of involvement in civic and social affairs, and because, perhaps most importantly, they employ an urban environmental justice framework that addresses the spatial dimensions of their community brought on by urban planning

decisions. They are examples of relatively successful African American Christian congregational activism responding to environmental challenges like air, water, and soil pollution, limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and community sustainability. Other churches across the country fit these categories, however, I selected these because they have been widely recognized for their role in environmental leadership and they represent context-specific black church urban environmental justice.

Whether addressing environmental sustainability, food apartheid, or illegal dumping, these three congregations illuminate the black church's direct engagement in environmental issues and social efforts to uplift their communities. My research examines particular black churches in real-world urban contexts responding to environmental injustice. These churches do not represent all black churches, nor do their social locations represent all American urban contexts. Instead, my research points to the breadth of environmental challenges an urban black church may address. Also, my research disrupts the narrative that given the myriad of social issues faced by black communities, black churches within those contexts are woefully unconcerned about the environment. Small, mid-sized, and large congregations of various denominational affiliations engage in environmental activism. It is important to note that Trinity is the only church not affiliated with a historically black church denomination. Trinity's association with the United Church of Christ - although the largest church in a predominately white denomination - makes it somewhat of an anomaly. However, their environmental activism is unsurprising considering the legacy of the United Church of Christ's concern for environmental justice in black communities (Grant 2013; Lerer & Allen 2008).

My decision to include black churches of two denominations - Baptist and United Church of Christ - underscores that "there is no monolithic Black Church" (Pinn and Pinn 2002, VII). In 2016, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, passed a resolution dedicated to addressing the uneven impacts of climate change. It was the first resolution of its kind in the church's nearly 200-year history (Landman 2016). Other historically black denominations like the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) are actively engaging in environmental activism. Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service awarded a $1 million award to the COGIC to plant trees in neighborhoods near urban congregations, enhance access to green spaces and spur workforce development ("COGIC to Receive Award to Spur New Tree Cover near Urban Congregations" 2024). Instead, various black churches continue black folk's religious and social heritage. Additionally, peering through a window of black church ecological activism provides potential eco-strategies for addressing urban environmental injustice. These churches are representative samples of black church environmental engagement as countless churches nationwide are engaged in this work, and I highlight other congregations who are active but not to the same extent. Although Apr III and Boeckelman (1997), Elonda Clay (2011), and Peter Gaal-Szabo (2022) describe black religiosity, black environmentalism, and black church activism, explicit references in black church studies and urban environmental justice remain sparse except for contributions from scholars like Eileen Smith-Cavros (2006), and Amanda Baugh (2017).

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Throughout this project, I weave the voices of interlocutors from varying academic disciplines - black church studies, urban environmental justice, sustainability,

ethics, sociology, and theology - to explain the future role of black churches in addressing socially contextual environmentalism. The layout of this dissertation aims to shed light on a growing number of predominately African American churches that are explicitly engaging in urban environmental activism as a means for community sustainability. In chapter one, I provide a historical overview of the rise of black churches - as an extension of African traditional religions, a creative response to white social oppression, and an evolving religious phenomenon. I explicate how the discourse within black church studies has expanded to include black social and environmental activism. In light of increased urbanization, the role of black churches in urban environmental justice deserves greater attention. Contributors like Pinn (2001), Banks (2014), and Baugh (2015; 2017; 2019) deserve recognition for exploring the role of black churches in environmental justice. However, the growth of black churches that are environmentally active deserves greater attention to offer a fuller narrative of black environmental activism that includes a look at black liberation theologies, black preaching, the role of black women, the new black church phenomenon in the urban north, and black churches as instigators of community change – these are all included to show an array of topics germane to this dissertation covered in black church scholarship.

Chapter two describes the environmental justice movement and the role of religion and its institutions in addressing unfair environmental policies and practices. I look at the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike in 1968 as a starting point for black-led environmental justice (Honey 2007; Glave 2010). Although the 1982 protests in Warren County, North Carolina, and religious institutions like Coley Springs Missionary Baptist Church that served as “ground zero” for that local environmental activism, are commonly

understood as the launchpad of environmental justice, the 1968 strike drew national attention to black environmental injustice. This section includes the influence of the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* report and a discussion on the development of the environmental justice movement and paradigm. I describe black environmental activism and the emergence of concepts like ecowomanism to expand the perspective of the environmental movement. A look at urban environmental injustice is included to describe the nuances of environmental injustice in urban spaces and the deleterious impacts of increased urbanization. It also includes a look at how environmental racism is not just contained in the U.S. but is indicative of a global structural dimension that burdens the poor and developing countries.

Chapter three explores urban environmental justice as a sub-theme of environmental justice and highlights the uniqueness of urban centers, which are often fraught with failing infrastructure, limited green space, increased pollution due to population density, vehicular traffic, and increased waste from industrialization (Pellow 2009; Anguelovski 2013). Furthermore, urban areas often lack socio-environmental amenities to support the health and well-being of residents. The urban impact on health and well-being may be due to limited access to playgrounds, fitness centers, and grocery stores stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables (Landry and Chakraborty 2009). Uneven impacts of growing urbanization on the environment and public health due to human-made urban environmental injustices like racial residential segregation are explored. Unjust zoning and planning decisions have been weaponized, rendering some communities more expendable than others based on race and class.

Chapter four provides a closer look at context-specific environmental activism observed at three urban churches in different regions of the country as already mentioned above. In this way, I show how environmental inequity affects black communities nationwide. I provide interviews with pastors, leaders of not-for-profit organizations, and grassroots organizers who detail their eco-justice work - challenges and successes. A brief history and demography are provided for each to place their environmental activism within context and show how some black churches, irrespective of their denominational association, are tackling social and environmental issues. Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, is tackling housing sustainability, food access, and solar energy projects to uplift their congregants and community socially. Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, started an urban garden that evolved into a food distribution operation during a critical time in the city's history. Now, the food distribution is a national network of black churches and farmers who supply food to needy communities. Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, advocates for clean air, water, and soil following an illegal dumping site being situated near a community of color. The responses of these churches are just some examples of the growing number of black churches across the country engaged in environmental activism.

Chapter five focuses on areas of environmental activism observed in some black churches and church-related organizations like Green the Church and GreenFaith. Here, I look at black churches like Florida Avenue Baptist Church, which incorporated 44 rooftop solar panels - making them the first church in Washington DC to rely on renewable solar energy (Fears 2011). Whether it is clean energy like at New Northside

Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri, or addressing food injustice at 31st Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, which became the first urban church to receive a USDA farmer's license, some black churches and church-related organizations are building a broadband coalition to address prevailing environmental issues in their communities.

Chapter six looks at black churches in an increasingly urban future to show how they might act as mediators for public health in poor and communities of color. The realities of increased urbanization, concentrated poverty, and social stratification that will come with it demand our attention since they will impact where people live, how they access health resources and social mobility. A look at social determinants of health and the role of urban dwellers in correcting unsafe and unhealthy environments is also included. I offer the potential role of black churches in the urban future as one that acts as a mediator of public health for black communities.

I offer that black church urban environmental activism is drawn from an African American ecclesial and environmental heritage and is linked to social justice activism. The pastors I interviewed for this project regarded social justice as the framework to extend their congregational reach into environmental justice. Their activism addressed a local issue that affected members of their congregations; sermons and teachings were tools to educate congregants about the importance of environmentalism. The network of structures and systems perpetuating environmental degradation is so complex that these pastors recognized the importance of addressing the issue while advocating for socio-structural change. Although the human capital (i.e., staff and volunteers) required to address the matrix is more than most black churches can support, some black Christian

congregations nationwide engage in environmental activism - solar panel installation, energy efficiency programs, food security, mitigating air and soil contamination. Including an urban environmental justice framework informs the role of black churches in addressing structural oppression supported by poor environmental decision-making.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

In this chapter I have laid out the scholarly reasons for this dissertation, but my interest in the topic does not stem solely from noticing a lacunae in the literature. This research grew from my prior professional career in architecture and urban planning and my twelve years work as a pastor and personal connection to environmental hazard. This combination amplifies my academic understanding of the sociology of religion, urbanization, ecology, and black church studies. In my work as an architectural designer, I designed a variety of commercial and residential properties. This work gave me entree into working within design specifications and access to people within social classes who had the economic means to purchase, renovate, and initiate architectural projects. As an assistant urban planner at a nationally recognized multi-disciplinary - architectural, engineering, and environmental - consulting and design firm, I prepared redevelopment and revitalization plans for municipalities throughout New Jersey. My reviews of land use applications, zoning, site plans, and environmental documents *helped* me to understand more clearly how the built environment impacted the natural environment and vice versa and public health. I also began to see how certain communities received a disproportionately greater share of environmental burden than others. During the economic downturn of 2008, I transitioned out of architecture and urban planning-related community development into full-time parish ministry work.

As the Pastor-in-Residence at a large Baptist church in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I learned the importance of contextual ministry. By this, I mean, as a historically black congregation in a predominately African American city, the church intentionally addressed issues germane to black social life. Subthemes of environmental justice like food access were included in their liberative theological framework alongside other pressing urban issues, including access to healthcare, gang-violence, police brutality, job access, and sexually transmitted diseases. Through their community development corporation, they provided programs and services to low-income earners and the marginalized. The time I served this congregation was instrumental in my understanding how black churches may respond to urban social issues through a justice lens. That experience directly informed my first lead pastoral call to a small New London, Connecticut church. There, I sought contextual ministry with a liberation theology perspective that included an environmental framework. Working with local officials and organizations to initiate community-sponsored programs, including food access opportunities, helped strengthen my desire to explore the role of black churches in environmental activism more deeply.

I have served as the lead pastor of three historically black churches in rapidly changing urban contexts - Connecticut (New London) and New Jersey (Jersey City and Elizabeth). In my observation, these predominately black congregations of varying size and denominational affiliation faced similar challenges, although they were in geographically different locations. As a pastor of churches within urban contexts, I observed some of my congregants' diminished health and well-being due to poor environmental quality. Acute and chronic health-related issues ranging from asthma,

cancer, and hypertension were evident throughout the congregation and community. One of the churches, situated along the main transportation artery of the city, has been a beacon of hope for nearly seventy-five years. The historic building designed by architect Abraham Davis is not only a place of worship for parishioners but a symbol of collective action for African Americans who pooled their resources to establish the first African American church in the City of Jersey City built by African Americans. However, a neighboring junkyard located beside and behind the church facility shines a light on how land-use planning unfairly locates industrial uses in economically depressed and predominately communities of color. Personally, my familial roots extend to rural North Carolina where some of my relatives were employed at one of the country's largest food-processing company's – Smithfield Foods, Inc. The pork production facility and distribution center is located just ten minutes away from my relatives home. As a child, I always knew we were nearing their home by the stench of hog waste and increased sounds of heavy trucks barreling down Highway 87 in Bladen County. As recent as 2021, Smithfield was at the center of legal battles with some local residents who cited the impacts of environmental racism and injustice as primary contributors to their compromised health (Newsome 2021).

My academic interest in the role of black church environmental activism is directly informed by my professional experience in architecture/urban planning and vocational pastoral call. I bring this first-hand experience in the worlds of community development and pastoral leadership in predominantly black churches to my exploration of what committed urban black churches can do to address anti-environmentalism. My academic training includes a focus on environmental design in architecture, infrastructure

planning, and examining the role of religion in society. As an undergraduate in architecture, I was fascinated by Frank Lloyd Wright's intentional efforts to design structures that incorporated elements like natural light, plants, water, and natural materials in them like at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona; or to use architecture to interpret some of nature's principles, as in the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. As a student at a seminary that emphasized environmental stewardship and justice, I was able to bring the weight of my academic and professional experience to bear in conversations about the role of religion in society. Having a theoretical toolkit and praxis in environmentally related fields informs my understanding of the role of religion and its institutions in environmental activism.

As the world's population increases, we must develop strategies to secure food production, prevent environmental genocide, decrease air pollution, and water and soil contamination. Additionally, we must think about housing and food accessibility for persons who will migrate to urban centers to obtain access to social mobility. These realities necessitate that urban black churches expand their role in the urban world. In other words, I am nudging black churches to incorporate an urban environmental justice framework in their social activism, both for the sake of their congregations and for the sake of the larger world. Alongside religious programs and institutions that support community and economic development, I urge black Christian congregations to address structural apparatuses like racially motivated urban planning policies that support anti-black spatial segregation, environmental planning, and degraded air, water, and land. Statistically, these practices resulted in black, brown, and poor communities unevenly targeted as sites for hazardous waste facilities more often than white communities (Taylor

2014; Mohai and Saha 2015; Stretesky and McKie 2016; Mascarenhas, Grattet, and Mege 2021). Consequently, as the work of the churches profiled in this dissertation demonstrate, the impacts on the health and well-being of black folk have been compromised by air pollution, contaminated water and food, and inadequate housing. As a sociologist, architectural designer and urban planner, and black church pastor, I acknowledge the environmental efforts of some black churches and urge more congregations towards environmental activism.

CONCLUSION

In this section, I have described the significance of this project as one that aims to bridge a gap in black church studies and urban environmental justice by centering some predominantly African American churches in the U.S. that are addressing environmental injustice within their contexts. Although gatherings like the National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit in 1993 shed light on black denominations' concern for and willingness to engage in environmental activism, as stated earlier, the historic summit does not mark the beginnings of black church environmental activism. Instead, it was a leap towards strengthening the connection between justice and the environment within historically black Christian congregations. Contributions from scholars whom I have already named, like Dianne D. Glave (2010, 2017), Pinn (2001, 2003), Amanda Baugh (2015, 2017, 019) and Apr III and Boeckelman (1997), Elonda Clay (2011), Betancourt (2018, 2022), and Peter Gaal-Szabo (2022), have drawn attention to the phenomena of black church environmentalism. Nevertheless, more scholarship is needed to spotlight how black churches are developing creative solutions to

food insecurity, unaffordable and unsustainable housing, and air, water, and soil contamination, considering growing urbanization and its impacts on public health.

The urban context and phenomenon impact the lives of the people who fill the pews on Sunday mornings (Lynch et al. 2019; Guyton 2022). Therefore, more scholarly contributions on black religious ecological engagement will bring together black church and urban environmental justice studies. Furthermore, it will correct a narrative that African Americans and their religious institutions are unconcerned and, therefore, nonactive in issues concerning the environment. Before turning to Chapter 1, I must restate that while this project is a scholarly undertaking, it is also deeply personal and professional. My work in historically black urban churches has afforded me first-hand experience with socio-environmental issues like limited access to green space, exposure to air, water, and soil pollution, and food insecurity. I have visited hospitalized congregants due to asthma, hypertension, and diabetes. With the assistance of dedicated church staff, I have had to educate, organize, and build partnerships to address environmental issues in low-income and underserved communities. I do not take this work and experience lightly. It has made the necessity of scholarship that spotlights the ongoing work of urban black churches to rectify anti-environmental policies and practices targeted at communities of color all the more apparent to me. Now, I turn to mapping the field of black church studies to explain the evolution of the black church's phenomena. A review of the literature on black church studies will show the origins and diversity of black church traditions that emerged in response to slavery, the great migration, and the advantage of black churches to include an urban environmental justice framework.

CHAPTER ONE

MAPPING THE FIELD: REFLECTIONS ON BLACK CHURCH STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of the connections between African traditions and religion in the antebellum South and the Caribbean include slave conversions to Christianity, which did not always mean abandoning African practices. After accepting Christianity, some African Americans broke away (while recognizing that some were never really "let in") from white churches and their continued racist and segregationist practices to establish their own religious institutions. By the twentieth century, particularly in relation to the emerging Pentecostal movement, new types of black churches emerged that emphasized personal experience noted by conversion, sanctification, and spirit possession (Fauset 1944/2002). As discussed later in this chapter, the great migration of rural southern blacks to the North transformed the role of some black churches in light of the challenges to black social life in urban areas (Baldwin 2007; Weisenfeld 2017). The movement of hundreds of thousands of blacks from the South to the North, from the country to the city, had religious implications alongside cultural reverberations. New religious phenomena emerged in the urban North, like storefront churches and black religious cults and sects (Sernett 1997; Crumbley 2012; Weisenfeld 2017). I suggest, given the cultural significance of black churches in times past, that today, black churches continue to bear the burden of shaping the welfare of African Americans. The rise of black churches from invisible institutions to denominational institutions, the legacy of social activism, and their role in shaping black family life, education, and economics describe their ability to respond to black social ills.

In this chapter, I review literature from leading scholars in black church studies to explain the evolution of the black church phenomena. A historical framework that situates black churches as an extension of African traditional religions, as a response to white oppressive systems, and as an evolving religious and social institution helps us understand how some black churches are responding to environmental injustice. Environmental policies and practices that compromise health and self-determination disproportionately render people of color expendable. As the oldest institution created, controlled, and maintained by African Americans, black churches are more than houses of worship. They are social centers of black life, cultural repositories, and service providers (DuBois 1903; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Day 2012).[1] In *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Floyd-Thomas et al. 2007), the authors describe black churches as a creative expression of black Christianity and not just a response to white dominance. The innovative nature of black churches is expressed in various ways depending on their social and geographical location. A look at black churches as rooted in African traditional religions, as incubators for other black social institutions like schools and banks, and the role of women in black churches begins to describe the complex nature of the phenomena.

The field of black church studies is precisely about this expansive approach and seeks to expand literature on black churches - their origins, development, and diversity

[1] There is debate concerning the relevancy of black churches in the lives of African Americans today, due to its reluctance to tackle pressing issues like homosexuality, its male-dominated hierarchy, and some prosperity-centered churches. The prophetic role of black churches - especially since the Civil Rights Movement (1950s and 60s) and in light of recent social and civil unrest - urges black churches to examine their mission and theology (Warnock 2013).

found within black church traditions - through research on black congregational life. In this way, the social, historical, and theological nuances of black church traditions are offered to provide a glimpse of the impact of black churches as ongoing cultural phenomena. Examining the evolution of the role of black churches informs this dissertation's focus on specific black churches and ongoing and emerging trends in black congregational life. In this chapter, I provide a glimpse how African traditional religions, and ancestor and nature veneration informed early African American religious expression. I explicate how black church phenomena signals self-autonomy - albeit limited under the purview of whites - and provides cultural preservation in a hostile society. I describe how black liberation theologies shaped the social activism of many churches and the role of preaching in black churches. I elucidate black religious phenomena in the urban North due to migration to describe how some black church congregations responded to social ills in urban settings, like limited accessibility to quality and affordable housing, jobs, healthcare, and healthy food, that laid the groundwork for contemporary outreach. In light of environmental injustice, which unfairly affects communities of color, and the growing number of black church responses, I offer that an urban environmental justice lens (discussed more extensively in Chapter 2) will further activism that is already existent in black churches to include spatial dimensions of their communities. I now begin by giving attention to the emergence of black churches.

ROOTS: THE RISE OF BLACK CHURCHES

In *The Negro Church,* DuBois asserted that black churches are "the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery" (1903,

ii). In *The Black Church in the African American Experience,* Lincoln and Mamiya added, "Reliable investigators have consistently underscored the fact that black churches were one of the few stable and coherent institutions to emerge from slavery" (1990, 7). Thus, the sociocultural, theological, political, and economic importance of the "invisible institution"[2] - under a white supremacist slave regime - as the primary context for shaping the black Christian experience was undervalued among white academicians and segregated to black scholarly discourse (Sernett 1997; Raboteau 2004; Battle 2006). Until the early 1900s, the study of black churches had been overlooked despite their cultural significance. For that matter, there was little sociological study of Christian churches from a sociological approach. DuBois's work has significantly impacted the development of the sociology of religion and congregational studies in the US.

As some scholars of black religious studies and black church studies have noted, black churches are one expression of African American religious phenomenon.[3] Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds, professor of religious studies and Africana studies, author of *The Other Black Church: Alternative Christian Movements and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (2021) illuminates alternative black Christian movements and black religious thought. For Corey D.B. Walker (2021), speaking of African American religion requires critical examination of African American *religions*, or the complex mixture of religious

[2] The term "invisible institution" was coined by E. Franklin Frazier in *The Negro Church in America* (1963). The term implies secret religious meetings held by enslaved Africans in response to white racist oppressive structures.

[3] According to Gayraud Wilmore (2004), black religious studies is described as an academic area that explores the religions of the people of the African Diaspora. Its scope includes but is not limited to religious expressions in Christianity, Islam, Neo-African religions, cults, and sects.

traditions that make up black religion. He writes, “a plurality of cultures, traditions, and ideas in dynamic tension with the complex context of North America in the modern age” shape what is African American religion. Defining African American religions poses a challenge because it encompasses a variety of cultures and ideas.

Lincoln and Mamiya’s earlier work called the *black sacred cosmos* “a unique Afro-Christian worldview that was forged among black people from both the African and Euro-American traditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (2003, 17). Yet, more recent scholarship recognizes the religious environmental sensibilities of enslaved Africans, as Christopher S. Hunter, professor of architecture, states, “Traditional African sacred space consisted of the understanding of the relationship between humankind and nature, natural places, and a cosmology that is human in its centrality…Natural sacred spaces in African society included forests, rivers, and mountains, as expressions of a true connection with nature” (2022, 2-5). Not only did religious practices occur in natural spaces, but the cosmos - sun, moon, sky, and earth gods - alongside animals and ancestors were venerated. Thus part of a religious perspective of African Americans that envisions the universe as sacred and acknowledges the impacts of Christianity and slavery on the black lived experience. Melanie L. Harris argues that “Since the 17th century, people of color have been enslaved, pushed onto reservations, forcibly removed from their territories, interned, or made to toil under harsh conditions (with limited opportunities for upward mobility),” hence, their environmental engagement is strikingly different from white counterparts (2017, 27). Descriptions of the connections between African traditions and religion in the antebellum South and the Caribbean include slave conversions to Christianity, which did not always mean

abandoning African practices. Raboteau offers that "African slaves and their African-American descendants incorporated elements from Catholicism and from diverse African religions into new African-American religions" (2001, 12).[4] So, vestiges of African cultural expressions were maintained in the new world (Gomez 2005; Glaude 2014; Weisenfeld 2017), some more recognizable than others. Henry H. Mitchell (2004) notes, "Among African-Americans, the immense and immediate popularity of the new Baptist faith, with its baptism by immersion, was a clear throwback to the powerful importance of water rituals in African traditional religion" (14). Retaining their religious heritages, even with prohibitions on cultural expressions of dance, song, and drumming, was a tool of resistance and self-reclamation.

DuBois (1903) recognized this: "Under the leadership of priest or medicine man, afterward, of the Christian pastor, the Church preserved in itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the center of Negro social life" (2). His description of the evolution of black churches from their origin in African life to a social institution in North America that centers black social life underscores how the church offered black folk a sliver of autonomy amid slavocracy and black cultural annihilation. Because black religious expressions in the U.S. may be traced to African religions and what was retained by those enslaved in the plantation south, Raboteau (2004) says that "African styles of worship, forms of ritual, systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were

[4] Raboteau notes that some Protestant worship styles resembled African worship celebrations, making Christianity appear more familiar to enslaved Africans. He also points out that not all Africans were Christian but maintained semblances of their Muslim devotion in the new world (2001, 49).

preserved in a pure orthodoxy but because they were transformed" (4). Foot patting, hand clapping, call and response, shouting, dancing, and spontaneous bodily movements are still part of some African American churches (Mitchell 2004).[5]

To understand the complexity of black religious phenomena in North America, one must read it through the vestiges of cultural diffusion, the plantation economy, the demonization of African religious practices, and prohibitions on cultural expressions like singing and dance. Since the maintenance of the dominant socio-cultural world depended on preserving the distinction between whites and blacks, black religion and how it manifested through institutions and movements in response to oppressive white systems must be understood more widely. Andrew Billingsley (1999) writes, "Black religion takes its origins not from established religion in America, but from the black experience in America" (xx). Instead of cultural eradication, a merger of Christianity and African religious practices occurred. Scholars like Henry H. Mitchell (2004) discuss how African American religion began before 1619 - when the first enslaved peoples landed in Jamestown, Virginia - and continued after their arrival. Mitchell offers, "More than an imposition by the whites, it was the similarity between the Christian religion and their traditional religion that fostered the passage of the faith of the hated master. And African beliefs still lived beneath visible Christianity" (2004 xv). Accordingly, the starting point for black church studies is an exploration of black religious studies and African religious traditions, which transmigrated from parts of Africa to the Americas due to the slave

[5] Henry H. Mitchell (2004) labels foot patting, shouting, dancing, and spontaneous bodily movements as "motor inventory", to get at a collection of bodily movements typically expressed among Africans and were cultural carryovers to the Americas and abroad.

economy. Yet, despite noting the presence of African cosmologies that related to nature, black church studies have rarely traced that to present-day black religious environmentalism.

As this concerns my project, it signals that in some ways, black church responses to environmental injustice are an extension of the history of African and African American sacred natural cosmos and an act of resistance against environmentally oppressive decisions that unreasonably harm communities of color. The pastors I interviewed - Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, Rev. Danielle Ayers, and Rev. Ambrose Carroll, Sr. - all name their work as an extension of African environmental legacy and a response to anti-black environmental practices. Each interviewee mentioned the term "Sankofa," a Ghanian word meaning, "it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost" (Temple 2010). The principle of Sankofa is depicted as a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward and an egg in its mouth. The egg represents knowledge from the past and the generation to come who may benefit from that wisdom. Reengagement of the past includes religious and cultural traditions. Recounting black religious formation - especially black Christian churches - in North America also includes a look at the great migration. The great migration was a watershed moment for black self-determination that profoundly impacted the role of urban northern black churches.

Black Churches in the Urban North

The internal migration of southern blacks versus external migrations reveals the impacts of race and class barriers insofar as "The Great Migration acted as a demographic watershed, the harbinger of economic, political, and social change that have transformed the United States" (Sernett 1997, 1). Narratives of European immigration have dominated

literature, although southern rural black folk who migrated to the urban North experienced a significant assimilation challenge as U.S. citizens as compared to external immigrants from outside the U.S. (Weisenfeld 2017; Arnesen 2018).[6] What drove the Great Migration (1910-1970) was the confluence of a desire to escape the oppressive conditions of the South and opportunities for socioeconomic advancement in the North. Between 1910 and 1920, more than 50,000 southern black migrants flooded northern cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Within ten years, Chicago's population increased by 148% as blacks made their way to the City (Sernett 1997, 155). Isabel Wilkerson, journalist and Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of the seminal piece, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2011), says that by the end of the great migration, 1970, the black population in Chicago had swelled to over one million people - a far cry from the nearly 44,000 black people who occupied the City before the migration. Growing industrial cities became epicenters of black concentration or *Black Metropolises*.[7]

Rural southern migrants tended to congregate in urban northern cities based on race, ethnicity, and customs, relying on the generosity of those like them for social,

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[6] The juxtaposition of promise and hardship created a complex narrative for black assimilation in the urban North. Amplifying stories of black migration contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences within the United States and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the distinct challenges faced by different communities.

[7] Drake and Cayton's term, *Black Metropolis*, describes the impact of black folk upon northern cities during the migration. The significance of black folk convergence upon urban cities in the North occurred "precisely as those cities enjoyed their era of greatest political and cultural authority" (1993, 112). Cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cleveland were burgeoning financial centers, political hubs, and cultural trendsetters.

economic, and educational advancement. But isolating blacks in congested areas where they could neither scatter nor expand constituted an extension of white social control (Drake & Cayton 1993). Consequently, the black ghetto emerged alongside competition for space, jobs, political power, and status. The mass exodus of rural southern blacks to northern cities transformed black churches as the social, religious, educational, and cultural center of black life and community. As Sernett (1997) points out, “Because of the institutional crisis set in motion by the interregional movement of hundreds of thousands of southern blacks, many more black religious leaders gravitated toward an understanding of the church’s mission that bridged the traditional dichotomy of spiritual and material” (242). Some black churches in the urban North continued the legacy of southern black churches by creating new ministries and social service programs that centered on the needs of newly migrated blacks. More will be said about these churches later in this section.

The Great Migration was the historical phenomenon that drove many portions of African American Christianity to become a vastly urban cultural phenomenon addressing social stability and not just individual salvation. The social dimensions of Christian life were front and center as some churches addressed the material needs of their members and communities. The distinct nature of black churches as a creative response to oppressive social conditions produced various programmatic and ministerial opportunities. In other words, black churches, cults, and sects that emerged in the urban north, through the ways they sought to meet newly migrated blacks' spiritual and material needs, were foundational for understanding more contemporary black churches that address social conditions that prohibit health and wellness, like environmental injustice.

However, the social outreach activities of black churches - in the urban north especially - should not be read as a rule but an exception (Sernett 1997).

Notable black religious institutions that emerged in the urban North include but are not limited to Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc., the United House of Prayer for All People, and the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement. A part of the lure of these movements and cults was the perceived economic, political, and educational advancement afforded blacks. Focusing racial consciousness and nationalism also supported black self-determination (Fauset 1944/2002; Dallum 2007; Curtis 2009; Delgado 2019). Black migration transformed northern urban black churches to the extent that "regularly established Negro churches placed less emphasis upon salvation after death and directed their activities increasingly to the economic, social, and political problems of Negroes in this world" (Frazier and Lincoln 1974, 88). Eddie S. Glaude, professor of African American studies considers the emergence of sects and cults to be evidence of "psychological dislocation that occurred in the shift from rural to urban life, as well as to the failure of traditional religious vocabularies to account for the migrants ' new circumstances" (2006, 496). Black churches had been the social organizing center before urbanization de-centered it from its privileged role in organizing black social life. However, black churches underwent secularization as they "lost their predominately other-worldly outlook and began to focus attention upon the Negro's condition in the world" (Frazier and Linclon 1974, 56). The urbanization of blacks brought on by the desire for economic and social advancement dispersed them into northern American cities and shifted their social organization.

The emergence of storefront churches as an expression of black church traditions was an "Attempt on the part of the migrants, especially from the rural areas of the South, to re-establish a type of church in the urban environment to which they were accustomed" (Sernett 1997, 191). For scholars like Frances Kostarelos, professor of anthropology and sociology, storefront churches were more critical - they represented spaces to redefine a worldview that opposed black uplift. Urban north storefront churches offered newly migrated blacks a familiar religious expression and were a continuation of the "legacy of black struggle against white oppression and racism in America" (Kostarles 1995, 2). The rise of storefront churches is more than a response to conflicts over worship style; they evidence religious entrepreneurship. Northern storefront churches represented black folk's social, spatial, and political objectives. Yet, they were and continue to be overlooked in their role in addressing socio-environmental challenges in black communities (Roane 2021). I acknowledge the work of small churches and organizations like the Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger, which have relatively successful environmental activism yet go unnoticed. The Campaign Against Hunger actively services 300,000 residents through their Brooklyn, New York-based program. According to their website, they began as a small pantry in a local church basement. More than twenty years later, they address food justice in New York through programs and services, including an urban farm. Like Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III's Black Church Food Network and Reverend Rich Joyner's Conetoe Family Life Center in Connote, North Carolina - more will be said about these church-affiliated organizations later - both of whom have been widely recognized for their work at the intersection of environmental and food justice, the Campaign Against Hunger, which predates them and was founded and led by

Dr. Melony Samuels, a black woman, may underscore how still today, black women's roles in environmental justice and its subthemes like food justice go relatively unnoticed.

Black Liberation Theologies

Foregrounding, black liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez defined liberation theology as a "theological reflection born of shared experience in the effort to abolish the present unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human" (Gutierrez 1972, 15). Theological reflection that centers the poor and marginalized seeks to undo existing social systems that sustain inequality and construct systems of fairness. More groundwork for black church studies had been laid with the contributions of sociologists like DuBois (1903) and historians like Carter G. Woodson (1921/2018), Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson *(*1933), Arthur H. Fauset (1944/2002), and E. Franklin Frazier (1963). What developed was an interdisciplinary field that also includes discourses on black liberation and womanist theologies, and black preaching—by the 1960s black liberation theology had emerged from black consciousness movements and the Civil Rights Movement.[8] The scholarly enterprise led to conversations between black church studies scholars and those in the sociology of religion, Christian ethics, homiletics, liberation theology, and practical theology. According to Sandra L. Barnes, professor of sociology:

> Liberation motifs were evident during slavery and emerged as Blacks appropriated religion to reflect their experiences…The emergence of a more formal Black Liberation Theology occurred when Christian theologians such as

[8] My use of the term social justice is drawn from Jost and Kay, who offer the concept as a product of social systems that result in *distributive*, *procedural*, or *interactional* justice. To learn more see: Jost, John T. and Aaron C. Kay. 2010. "Social Justice: History, Theory, and Research." In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology*, 1122–1165. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

> James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, De Otis Roberts, Major Jones, Cornel West, Jacqueline Grant, and William Jones developed systematic theologies from the Black perspective. (Barnes 2006, 332)

As an academic discipline, liberation theology, emerged during the 1950s and 60s, applying Catholic and Protestant theology to the Latin American and African American experience, respectively. Centering marginalized and poor communities, liberation theologies sought to explicate social, political, or economic justice (fairness) in light of lived experience. This theological perspective helped contextualize Christianity from the standpoint of the lived experiences of the marginalized and continues to serve as a driving force behind liberation activism, which includes environmental justice.

Black liberation theology seeks to liberate people of color from white oppressive structures that support their political, social, economic, and environmental ruin. James H. Cone (2010), who is recognized as the founder of black liberation theology, defined it as "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ" (1). For Cone, the revelation of Jesus identified him with those who suffered under oppression. So, black liberation theology is grounded in at least two fundamental principles: the experiences of marginalized blacks and the belief that Jesus identifies with oppressed black folk. Following Cone's example, Black liberation theology plays a significant role in black church environmental justice work. Some black churches participate in the liberating work of Christ by rejecting the world as it is and living out the gospel through the aid of the Holy Spirit. Whether hosting voter registration drives, operating daycares or nurseries, constructing affordable housing, or planting gardens, predominately black churches like Trinity UCC, Pleasant Hope BC, and Friendship-West BC believe they participate in God's activity among the marginalized.

By proclaiming God's liberation in history, making the gospel a social, economic, and political reality, and being the church in the world, some black churches seek social, political, economic, and environmental liberation.

Scholarly emphasis on black liberation theology expands black church studies to mine black congregants 'attitudes about civil rights activism, black women's role in black churches, and how biblical passages like the children of Israel's exodus from Egyptian captivity and Jesus 'ministry among the poor and marginalized shape sermons and congregational life (Barnes 2006; Napierala 2020; Mdingi 2023). Yet, oversimplifying liberation in terms of "spiritual" freedom dismisses the realities of structural, economic, political, environmental, and social conditions that shape everyday life. Liberation theology states that God's call to the children of Israel must be read in light of their social situation – bondage – for "By delivering this people from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating the covenant on the basis of that historical event, God reveals that he is the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage" (Cone 2010, 2). Therefore, some black church leaders and congregants, like those at the churches this project centers, believe justice also extends to the environment. Reverend Danielle Ayers, Pastor of Social Justice at Friendship-West Baptist Church, who was interviewed for this project, said, "I want to hold a training session to train at least 50 people to understand why it's important to be involved in environmental justice. That's success for me because at least 50 people have heard and understood the connection between their faith and the environmental justice movement and why we have to be engaged and connected." I will share more from that interview in Chapter 3.

As the premier institution of black communities, historically, black churches assisted movements like the civil rights and environmental justice movements and theological and social authority. They leveraged their congregations, physical buildings, and finances for campaigns to become a vehicle through which blacks sought economic, political, social, and educational advancement. Black churches were "gap fillers" between white society and black self-determination. Narrating the role of some black churches in the civil rights movement, historian Aldon Morris (1996) writes, "Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting-places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle" (29). He continues, "The view of religion as a dynamic force for social change was a cornerstone of the social gospel" (Morris 1996, 44). Through congregational songs and carefully crafted sermons, the revolution was promulgated. However, not all black church congregations emphasized black liberation theology. Barnes (2006) writes, "denominations comprised of more impoverished and less formerly educated clergy tend to be less aware of this theology" (333). While black liberation theology burgeoned in black academic settings, its influence on black congregational preaching life varied. The pastor's beliefs, educational background, denominational affiliation, congregation size, and socio-economic makeup all influence a church's black liberation theology potential (Barnes 2006).

BLACK CHURCH STUDIES: PREPARING THE PASTORS WE NEED

Preparing students for ministry in African American congregations and communities is one of the aims of black church studies in light of a chasm between theology and practical preparedness. Accordingly, black church studies "focused on developing the worship life, ecclesial practices, and theological understandings of African American churches" (Floyd-Thomas et al. 2007, xix). The seminal *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* looks at the study of black churches through history, congregational studies, and sociology. Yet, the only mention of the *environment* throughout the entire 287-page book is a reference to environmental crisis tucked within a list of other crises facing black communities like drugs, incarceration, and increased joblessness. A full exploration of how the environment affects black lives and the role of black religious institutions in addressing this infraction is overlooked. Though the authors describe black church beginnings in the hush harbors of the antebellum south, environmental and agricultural epistemologies of the enslaved go unnoticed.

Some black church scholars have described the black church's preoccupation with the "otherworldly" and its disconnection from current social, economic, political, and environmentally oppressive systems as reasons why some churches resisted the civil rights movement and liberation theology (Andrews 2002; Barber 2015). Black denominations like the National Baptist Convention lodged complaints against the black power movement and black theologians, citing that "black theology sacrifices the universality of the Christian gospel for a narrow accommodation of blackness and liberation" (Andrews 2002, 4). Scholars like Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell (2007), former professor of political science and African American studies, Eric L. McDaniel (2009, 2018), professor of politics, race, and religion, and Jonathan C. Augustine (2020, 2023),

pastor and professor of law, have argued for black church responsiveness to the social and political conditions of black people. This debate between scholars of black theology and black church practitioners, and with communities of scholars and practitioners, signals perspectival differences in the perceived and actual role of black churches. Scholarly contributions in black church studies like Gayraud Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1998) and Andrew Billingsley's *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (1999), both highly regarded, go to lengths to provide a synopsis of the social conditions of the antebellum south and urban north that inform the black church phenomena and black liberation theologies that have emerged. Later works from scholars like Walter Earl Fluker's *The Ground Has Shifted* (2016) helped expand the field of black church studies to include the black churches relevance in social and post-racial affairs. Roger A. Sneed's *The Dreamer and the Dream: Afrofuturism and Black Religious Thought* (2021) challenges the perceived central role of black churches in the social life of African Americans and offers Afrofuturism as a visionary way forward. Most assuredly, since DuBois (1903), black church studies have expanded to include a wide range of intersections.[9] Nevertheless, this literature stops short of addressing the role of black churches in urban environmental justice. For many black churches, the

[9] The concept of Afrofuturism is understood as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 2013) and offers possibilities to create a unique and imaginative vision of the future. Writer Masiyaleti Mbewe adds that these elements also "critically *engage* the roles climate change, global warming and environmental racism will play in these imaginings" (2020, 1). To learn more about afrofuturist environmentalism see Simone Wolynski, 2020. "Environment In Crisis: Seeking An Afrofuturist Perspective." *Pitzer Senior Theses. 107* (January). https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1113&context=pitzer_theses.

definition of liberation, but not necessarily black liberation theology, almost always appears void of land, environment, and space.[10]

Notwithstanding, there are some black scholars and theologians like Dianne D. Glave, whose work at the intersection of African American and environmental history has helped bridge the gap. In "Black Environmental Liberation Theology: The Historical and Theological Roots of Environmental Justice Activism by the African American Church," she traces the beginnings of the environmental justice movement to African American churches and emerging "out of a confluence of religious beliefs, and Civil Rights social thought and action" (2004, 1). Glave's contribution is significant because it introduces a new black environmental liberation theology model and offers an environmental agenda for action. More specifically, she writes, "The language of theology--a black liberation theology for environmental justice by the church against oppression is a means of combating environmental racism" (2004, 2). Here, she underscores the role of the African American church in shaping a theology of liberation - as noted in the prior section - and an environmental liberation theology.

Black churches offer space for people of color to express their critique of society and work for social change. what has become of black churches However, and what will become of them may depend upon prevailing social conditions and their willingness to address those conditions. Describing the role of some black churches in response to external social realities like racial residential segregation, disproportionate exposure to

[10] Notwithstanding, scholars like Delores Williams (1993/2013), Theodore Walker (1994), James Cone (2000) and Dianne D. Glave (2016) have advocated that black liberation theologies include environmental justice frameworks as a part of its black liberation theology.

air, water, and soil pollution, and limited access to quality and affordable housing needs to be a part of black church studies. But just as black church studies inporporate the role of black preaching, a look at how the black-lived experience and liberation theologies play a role in current eco-justice churches also needs to include how they are shaped by black preaching life, and how black preaching helped congregants interpret what they observed and experienced, and so we now turn to that topic.

Black Preaching

Henry Mitchell's pioneering text, *Black Preaching* (1970), helped expand the field of black church studies, emphasizing the role and significance of black preaching in black church worship life. Later, scholars like Bettye Collier-Thomas (1997), Milton C. Sernett (1999), Dale P. Andrews (2002), and Cleophus J. LaRue (2016) contributed with a focus on the role of black women preachers in black churches, how black preaching shapes congregational life, and black preaching as a tool for social action. Historically, many black preachers acted as social interpreters who called for action, leading people of color to resist oppressive treatment (Andrews 2002; Mills 2018). Such was the case with Nat Turner, who, during his confession, spoke of how his sermons became tools to animate others' actions: "Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow-servant (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks-for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt), but by the communion of the Spirit, whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God, -- I now began to prepare them for my purpose, by telling them something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to me" (Confessions 1831).

Sermons like “What’s In Your Hand?” (1967) by Baptist pastor and politician Adam C. Powell Jr., and “Are We Able to Go Up and Possess the Land?” (1894) by Reverend Reverdy C. Ransom, African Methodist Episcopal Bishop, spoke to the lived realities of black people and motivated them to participate in political affairs and strive for self-determination. This continues to be evident: more recent sermons by preachers who are profiled in this dissertation because of their attention to environmental justice, such as “When the Brook Dries Up” (2013) by Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, “Mercy Mercy Me, Things Ain’t What They Used To Be” (2021) by Rev. Dr. Freddie Haynes III (taking its title from singer Marvin Gaye’s song of environmental lament), or “Faith for Every Season” (2021) by Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III, continue to use biblical narratives to raise the realities of unjust environmental policies and practices that inordinately affect vulnerable communities. These sermons include references to environmentalism, politics, and community action.

Bernard W. Bell, professor of American and African American literatures, categorizes this kind of black preaching as Jeremiadic preaching, which is black prophetic preaching that speaks truth to power, which helpfully describes the sermons mentioned above. He says, “The African American Jeremiadic cry is “No more water, the fire next time,” and “We shall overcome!” (2009, 338). Prophetic warnings and predictions of divine judgment against political powers are an extension of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures like Jeremiah (hence the name Jeremiad), Isaiah, and Amos. Black preaching shaped theology and congregational activism and signaled the rise of the black-cleric politician. For example, some held political positions like Representative Richard Harvey Cain (South Carolina 1873 - 1875 and 1877 -1879), who was a pastor in

the A.M.E. church, and Hiram Rhoades Revels, who was a Methodist minister and America's first African American senator - (R)Mississippi - from 1870 to 1871 (Gilbert 2020). As champions of social reform and black communal uplift, clergy persons like Adam C. Powell, Sr. pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York (1908 - 1936), and Florence S. Randolph, pastor of the Wallace Chapel AME Zion Church in Summit, New Jersey (1925 - 1946), occupied religious and community activist spaces. Often, their sermons were a means for urging black parishioners to protest against white oppressive systems. These powerful preachers set the template for others to follow.

For Marvin McMickle, former president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School and current Interim Regional Executive Minister of The Cleveland Baptist Association of American Baptist Churches USA, prophetic preaching means the sermon plays a role in shaping the prophetic dimension of the life of churches. He writes, "Prophetic preaching shifts the focus of a congregation from what is happening to them as a local church to what is happening to them as a part of society" (2006, 78). He underscores the church's responsibility to shift the congregations' focus from insular matters to outside issues that affect the lived realities of people. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III, and Rev. Dr. Freddie Haynes III are exemplary preachers who use the pulpit to address societal issues like food apartheid, affordable housing, healthcare, and environmental injustice. Each is very much influenced by their prophetic preacher fathers.[11] They are an extension of a legacy of prophetic preachers who speak

[11] Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III is the son of Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr., who worked alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and served as co-pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia during Martin Luther King Sr. pastoral tenure. Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III is the son of the late Bishop Heber Brown, Sr, a respected establishmentarian of churches and community

truth to power and use sermons, among other tools, as a tool for congregational activism.[12] Later, in Chapter 3, we will examine some examples of their sermons.

Today, prophetic preaching addresses issues such as the social welfare of LGBTQ youth forced into homelessness and poverty, the continued disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS, or raising concerns about undocumented workers, access to firearms, and environmental justice. This is a continuation, of the legacy of the civil rights movement, as Anthony Pinn, professor of religious studies, noted in 2001, "New generations of Progressive Baptists are continuing the struggle for full voter registration, education [and] participation, affirmative action against all forms of racism and bigotry, black economic empowerment and development, and equal educational opportunity" (2001). McMickle (2006) insists that today's prophetic voices must be likened to Martin Luther King, Jr., Samuel Proctor, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Prathia Hall, Henry Ward Beecher, and Morris Brown and not coopted by capitalism or political gain. When preachers move beyond the ecstasy of praise and worship to addressing the realities of access to assault weapons, a living wage, fair housing, equal education, and environmental justice, then society will

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programs in Newark, New Jersey. Rev. Dr. Freddie Haynes III is the son of the late Rev. Frederick D. Haynes, Jr., and grandson of the late Dr. Frederick D. Haynes Sr., who pastored the historic Third Baptist Church in San Francisco, California, which hosted some of the country's most prominent figures from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to W.E.B. DuBois. I hope to make the point that they have a secure position from which to push the church to include environmental justice.

[12] For historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2021), alongside the black preaching tradition, black sacred music also conveyed the existential realities of black life within white political, economic, and cultural society. The music and sermons of black churches are an infusion of jazz, blues, spirituals, and Protestant hymns that emerge from the depths of black experience and creativity. For more on the role of black sacred music, read Jon Michael Spencer. (1990). *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (1990). See also, Robert Darden. (2014). *Nothing But Love in God's Water: Black Sacred Music from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement.*

transform, or at least that is the goal of some of today's prophetic voices like Reverend Dr. William Barber II, former pastor and professor in public theology and policy, and founding director of the Center for Public Theology & Public Policy at Yale Divinity School, who is working to continue Martin Luther King's poor people's campaign.[13]

An example helps to make this point. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III's sermon entitled "The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Children" by Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III unpacks systematic attempts to subjugate children of color through mass incarceration, poor education, and economic exploitation. He urges his listeners to mimic the historical role of black churches in social activism to address relevant issues:

> [Ta-Nehisi] Coates, in such a powerful way raises the question that no matter whether you are bourgeois or you are struggling from check to check, that we all to some degree fear for our children…giving the historical perspective and also critiquing the policy in America. He says there is a systematic attempt to harvest the genius and strength of black personhood for economic and cultural purposes. Why are black people viewed as a profit and a problem at the same time? When you take mass incarceration plus economic exploitation plus poor education, you always get subjugation. Whenever you have these three things together, something happens to a community…it is a trifecta. I'm so glad I'm in Salem tonight; at a church that recognizes that we are not just here to worship and just lift up praises on Sunday, but are committed to transforming what happens in our neighborhood…There is power within the black church. We must recognize and reclaim that power. Because when we reclaim that power we recognize that when we have the right theology, that it will literally change our anthropology, and that anthropology will shift our psychology, give us a new sociology and literally change our biology.

In his sermon, Rev. Moss III uses the gospel of Matthew (Chapter 2: 13-21), which narrates Joseph's angelic visitation and warning about Herod's plot to kill all young boys, and an article written by journalist and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates, entitled, "The Black

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[13] Rev. William Barber II earned a Doctor of Ministry at Drew Theological School in 2003 and has since gone on to become a leader in national social issues. He is co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival that focus on anti-poverty.

Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" to highlight structural violence aimed at children of color. Black prophetic preachers, like Rev. Moss III, interpret social conditions in light of the biblical narrative and galvanize people of color for self and social change. He (Rev. Moss) stands squarely in the black prophetic preaching tradition and, in that, follows in the footsteps of his predecessor.

Black prophetic preaching as a tool for galvanization and social change was evident in the fiery sermons, Moss's predecessor, Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., former pastor of Trinity UCC and Moss' predecessor. An exploration of black preaching - especially black liberation and Jeremiadic preaching - in black church studies explicates how his sermons made him a poster child of angry black anti-American preaching.[14] Bell writes, "Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright has scriptural and secular authority for his prophetic mission of warning the nation of divine judgment for transgressing our personal and national covenant with God and man," (2009, 342) and represents an extension of a social Gospel and prophetic tradition that builds on the first testament prophets to speak truth to power. However, Rev. Dr. Wright's preaching style and sermon content became a tool of

[14] After damning America for its vitriolic conduct against African Americans, Rev. Wright's character was maligned, and a feeding frenzy ensued that resulted in then candidate Barak Obama politically distancing himself from the retired pastor (he had already planned to retire before this and was replaced by Rev. Otis Moss III) which included the Obamas leaving Trinity UCC. However, Rev. Dr. Wright's sermon aligns with the historical tradition of the African American church, preacher, and perspective of some black churches today (Bell 2009). His opponents, which included white and black clergymen and women argued that his sermons "mix left-wing conspiracy theories, phony Afro-centrism, remnant black power rhetoric and a rag tag of vulgar Third World sympathies in an angry, frequently race-baiting social gospel" (Herman 2008). As concerns over Rev. Wright's Afrocentric theology grew, "Obama even noted that Wright had a profoundly distorted view of this country" (Herman 2008). In contrast to the post-racial rhetoric of Obama-era politics, Rev. Wright's condemnation of America is a reminder of the ongoing legacies of slavery and black mistrust of the government.

the media and critics of then President Barak Obama, who aired excerpts of a sermon he preached, which included an indictment of America's historic treatment of people of color, to discredit the presidential candidate Obama.

Like the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was filled with righteous indignation at the injustice of local and state-sanctioned Jim Crow laws, Rev. Dr. Wright's anger was directed at America in response to "the crimes and sins of our government for breaking the covenant with God that all men are equal and endowed with such inalienable rights as life and liberty, replacing the covenant with the myth of white supremacy" (Bell 2009, 336). Rev. Dr. Wright's prophetic preaching that called America to repent of her sins of racism, slavery, and injustice is an extension of a long line of Jeremiadic voices. In "Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System," Hermon and Peterson (2008) describe how black preachers are demonized for their justice critique of the American social system. The black preachers' prophetic witness to power structures is chided as anti-American by some politicians. Black preachers like Rev. Dr. Wright, as was Rev. Dr. King, are portrayed as divisive compared to their white counterparts. In Chapter 3, I offer a look at how sermons by black preachers like Pastor Danielle Ayers, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III, and Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III weave togther social and environmental justice themes like climate change, COVID-19, and land grabbing with the biblical narrative to raise congregants' awareness of systematic environmental disadvantage targeted at communities of color. But, first, I explore the terrain of black women's role in black churches, where preaching - let alone prophetic preaching – was/is a limited option.

Black Women: Church and Society

The development of black church studies and an exploration of the roles of black women from its inception to the present owes much to scholars like Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994), Barbara Dianne Savage (2006), and Katie Geneva Cannon (2011). While some scholars herald the liberative nature of black churches, others offer sharp criticism over the extent of that liberation to include black women fully (Cheryl Townsend Gilkes 2001; Daphne Wiggins 2006). Black women are far less likely to preach, for instance, even when they are on the church staff. For Bettye Collier-Thomas (2010), Chanequa Walker-Barnes (2014), and Tamura Lomax (2018), the black church has not been an affirming space for all black women or their ministries. Yet, black church women play a key role in the environmental justice moevement. Thus, because women play a vital role in all the churches I am lifting, I would like to elaborate on the scholarship that helps understand the dynamics they face.

The role of black women in the ongoing development of black churches across denominations has not been prioritized, although they constitute much of the black religious community (Higginbotham 1994; Pinn 2002; Crumbley 2012; Day 2012; Robertson 2020). Scholars in the field have neglected women's contributions to homes, churches, and church-affiliate institutions (Cannon 2011). In *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion,* Collier-Thomas (2010) describes how African Americans created spaces of resistance that helped reclaim their humanity and self-determination. However, maintaining separate religious spaces led to the construction of gendered spaces. As Lincoln and Mamiya point out in their classic volume on the black church, that is because “As the invisible, underground religion of the slave churches

emerged into visible, institutional black churches of Baptist and Methodist persuasion, the freedmen and former slaves who founded these churches often accepted in toto the rules, beliefs, hierarchy, structure, and patriarchal conventions of their white counterparts from whose churches they were now separated" (1990, 278). In Townsend Gilkes',*If It Wasn't for the Women. . .: Black Women's Experience And Womanist Culture In Church And Community*, she identifies gendered antagonism as "one of the constructive elements or elementary forms of religion," (2001, 6) which she draws from the work of sociologist Emilie Durkheim (2016/1912). In a sense, institution building helped construct a network for blacks to cope with the realities of a dominant white society marked by social isolation, segregation, and marginalization. Yet, it perpetuated these oppressions on black women.

Lifting black women's religious roles in the slave community, Collier-Thomas notes they were the chief shouters and mourners during religious services, and "some women assumed the role of preacher and conducted funeral services…" (2010, 14). As black religious institutions became more and more male-dominated, black women struggled to exercise their skills. According to TeResa Green, professor of political science and African American studies, the role of women in black churches goes unrecognized because of sexism that:

> precludes the Black Church from overcoming male exclusivism. This exclusivism is viewed as limiting women in political power, equality of rights, and social privilege. The reliance of the Black church on the charismatic gifts of the male Black pastor is seen as an indication of how the principles of human freedom have been applied and adopted into the polity and doctrine of the church inconsistently. (2003, 116)

As black church institutions developed, women's roles were excluded or deemed unofficial. Furthermore, as black churches became more visible political and social institutions, black women's visibility receded for black male leadership recognition (Green 2003).

A combination of the sexism of perceived black male charismatic authority, and stereotypes about leadership incapability, often keeps black women subjected in the churches they support. Additionally, prioritizing male leadership may be seen as keeping "in line" with the Bible. Thus, as Karen H. Kim, professor of health behavior whose work includes racism, black churches, and health access points out: "Rejection of female religious authority was viewed as necessary to preserve the church's identity. For some male-headed congregations, not recognizing the legitimacy of female religious authority was not an issue of gender discrimination, but instead, a necessary belief to preserve the truth as illustrated in the Word of God" (2011, 644).

Tamura Lomax, professor of religious studies, explains black church social control through the Jezebel trope, which reinforces male domination and black female subjugation. In an interview with WBUR, Boston's national public radio, Lomax pointed out that Jezebel, the Biblical queen, "has become shorthand for a woman who is manipulative, seductive and wicked" (Clayson and Raphelson 2021). Though Jezebel was a powerful female figure, her refusal to worship the Hebrew God of her husband, King Ahab is portrayed as offensive. Accordingly, a "Jezebel" is not only a sexually provocative woman but one who has too much power – and doesn't submit to male authority. For Lomax, the Black church's use of this trope to control black women gets at

power dynamics based on sex and gender that exists within black church spaces. Consequently,

> The Black Church sometimes mirrors the antiblack, sexist, classist, homophobic, transantagonistic violence experienced in the rest of the world. And for black women and girls, it can be a battleground for simultaneous erasure and stereotypic seeing, or, more explicitly, marginalization and sex discrimination on some days, and sexualization, clandestine catcalling, unblinking stares, name calling, sexual harassment, and sexual violence-emotional, physical, epistemological, and otherwise-on others. (2018, ix)

For some, black churches may not be the liberative religious and social institutions they have been historically viewed as.

Historically, women preachers like Jarena Lee (1783-1864), Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), and Amanda Berry Smith (1837-1915) tenaciously maneuvered through black male-dominated churches and denominations to live out their callings. Facing institutional restrictions, some black women found niche ways of engaging in ministry despite lacking access to more visible positions of power like preacher or pastor. Through women's conventions and missionary societies, black women found space to exercise their callings (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Women like Rebecca Cox Jackson emerged as forerunners leading prayer meetings in Philadelphia in 1831 (Raboteau 2001). Black women like Sojourner Truth (?-1883), Dr. Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), and Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune (1875-1955) became abolitionists and educators (Johnson 2013).

Women's leadership in African American churches is noteworthy, although their work does not get the high profile that male pastors do. For that matter, black women's leadership role in the environmental justice movement is equally laudable yet sidelined by prevailing narratives of sexism and white activism (Rainey and Johnson 2009).[15] Yet,

[15] Rainey and Johnson (2009) provide an impressive look at the role of women of color in the environmental justice movement - even listing the names of pioneering black

many environmental justice organizations and movements were founded by black women like Hazel Johnson, affectionately known as the "mother of the environmental justice movement." She was a resident of Altgeld Gardens, a housing project built on a landfill surrounded by toxic facilities on the South Side of Chicago, when she began investigating and advocating for better living conditions in public housing (Chicago Public Library 2018, Hoskins, 2023).[16] Other black female environmental leaders like Charlotte L. Keys, founder of Jesus People Against Pollution, and the women of the Newtown Florist Club underscore the role of African American women in environmentalism, some of whom did not receive support from their churches and so had to make a way to be heard.

Today, Monica Brown-Moss, immediate past chairwoman of the Greater Chicago Food Depository and wife of Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, is a leader in food justice initiatives and provides leadership at Trinity UCC promoting healthy food education, an organic garden, and a farmers' market. Yet, that work is often just ascribed to Rev. Dr. Moss III. Rev. Danielle Ayers, Pastor of Social Justice at Friendship-West BC, includes environmental justice as a sub-theme of social justice that bears attention. However, more

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women and their environmental organizational affiliations. Yet, where Rainey and Johnson stop short is in explicitly naming why black women are overlooked in environmental justice history. Except for a recognition that women of color are viewed as a "subaltern group" that experiences multilevel subordination, the authors miss how race and gender intersect with black women's experiences in white dominated movements like environmentalism.

[16] Altgeld Gardens was one of the first public housing developments in the United States. It was developed on an abandoned waste site and surrounded by the most landfills per square mile in the United States. To learn more about Altgeld see: Brandi M. White and Eric S. Hall. (2015). Perceptions of environmental health risks among residents in the "Toxic Doughnut": opportunities for risk screening and community mobilization. *BMC Public Health*, 15(1), 1-9. See also Nicole Hoskins, "Justice Otherwise." In *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Whitney A. Bauman 221-233. London: Routledge Press, 2023.

often, it is Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Freddie Haynes III that is noted. She is also a board member of Southern Sector Rising, a non-profit that campaigns for environmental justice, under the leadership of Marsha Jackson - who was also interviewed for this project. The role of black women in religious and church-affiliate spaces gets at the various ways black women have exercised their skills and lived out their callings in the shadow of big-name male pastors.

A lack of visibility and barriers to leadership in some denominations and churches, an awareness of inordinate environmental burdens placed on black communities, coupled with increased environmental vulnerability for black women specifically, may be the reason black women find a home in the environmental justice movement (Rainey and Johnson 2009; Thomas 2018). Here, they can exercise their gifts for self-determination and community sustainability. Examples of leading black women at the forefront of environmental justice like Monica Moss (Trinity UCC), Marsha Jackson (Southern Sector Rising), Veronica Kyle (EcoWomanist Institute), Rev. Danielle Ayers (Friendship-West Baptist Church), Majora Carter (Sustainable South Bronx), and Peggy Shepard and Vernice Miller-Travis (WeACT for Environmental Justice) get at how black women continue to advance black social and environmental uplift - not just behind the pulpit but through black-church affiliated organizations.

BLACK CHURCHES AND BLACK SELF-DETERMINATION

Through prayer, preaching, and song, black churches nurtured their folk with the assurance of God's presence in their struggle for freedom. What Du Bois calls "the frenzy" of shouting and dancing consoled the enslaved to endure hardship. In a New York Times Magazine article, Henry L. Gates, professor and Director of the Hutchins

Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University, writes, “With a language all its own, symbols all its own, the Black Church offered a reprieve from the racist world, a place for African Americans to come together in community to advance their aspirations and to sing out, pray out, and shout out their frustrations” (Gates 2021a, 3). Hence, some black churches became meeting grounds for those who wanted to defeat the slave system. It provided space for slave revolt meetings and helped sustain the Underground Railroad. Here, preachers and abolitionists emerged alongside political leaders (Billingsley 1999). As the epicenter of black life, the burden of black churches was to address both spiritual and material needs, and this continues. The churches I describe in this project are examples of how some black churches address environmental needs in their communities. These churches represent a growing number of black churches (the Green the Church organization says over 1,000 are part of their network of black churches committed to environmental justice) that are building upon the black church’s historical past as social centers, cultural repositories, and mediators of vital social services to correct environmental injustices like food apartheid, air and soil pollution, and sustainability.

Professor of sociology and African American studies, Shaonta’ E. Allen (2023) describes the multifaceted role of black churches as a response to and creative production of black folk in light of oppressive white systems. For her, four social functions (i.e. socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, socio-educational) of black churches emerged that help explain their vital role in the social lives of blacks.[17] However, even

[17] To learn more about the four functions (i.e. socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, socio-educational) see: Shaonta ’E. Allen 2023. "Is the Black Church

her work neglects their role in environmentalism, which is part of the above functions. But the lived experience of blacks from the rural south to the urban north and environmentally racist policies and practices targeted at black communities' influence what black churches continue to signify. Raboteau states, "Black religious institutions have been the foundation of Afro-American culture. An agency of social control, a source of economic cooperation, an arena for political activity, a sponsor of education, and a refuge in a hostile white world" (2004, Preface). As the dominant institution in and for black communities, black churches provide safety, self-reclamation, education, fellowship, communal affirmation, material resources, and hope for a better future. The sacred and profane meet, where spiritual and cultural continuity occurs as the ancestors' faith is summoned (Gates 2021a). Littlefield states,

> Historically, the Black Church developed in response to the racism in society and represented an opportunity for African Americans to worship, congregate and organize. Often this organization during slavery became a place to assemble insurrections, disseminate anti-slavery information, educate the slaves and hide fugitive slaves. Hence, liberation was part of the original doctrine of the church and in many ways define Black religion. Thus the development of the Black church and its constant role in initiating change in the lives of African Americas represents the radical nature of religion and how this type of radicalism translates into self-help and social change. (2005, 687)

The historical relevancy of black churches helped define its self-help doctrine, which is illustrative of the will of the victimized to change their conditions. Following the slave era, some black churches responded to the social welfare of their congregants by establishing schools, mutual aid societies, and banks. It is the seat of cultural power for black folks and well-equipped to take on issues of environmental injustice now.

Dead?: Religious Resilience and the Contemporary Functions of Black Christianity" *Religions* 14, no. 4: 460. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040460

As I have already stated, black clergy as political officials became a way for them to advocate more directly for their communities. Black clergypersons like Bishop Henry McNeal Tuner, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and more recently, Rev. Raphael Warnock, Senator from Georgia, reflect this pastor-social activist strain. Holding a political office may offer opportunities to create an environmental policy that levels the playing field against harmful environmental exposure. As representatives of black communities in the seat of political power, they voice the issues and concerns of the people they represent. With the 1964 Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act of 1965, black church civic engagement began to play significant roles in local and national politics. The emphasis of some black churches on electoral politics, voting rights, and political representation in some of the highest seats of government was, and is, a response to social inequalities heaped upon people of color (Smith 2003). Today, contemporary black clergy figures like Reverend Dr. Floyd H. Flake (who served in the U.S. House of Representatives, New York (D) from 1987 to 1997, and Reverend Dr. DeForest Soaries, former Secretary of State of New Jersey from 1999 to 2002, have successfully extended the reach of black churches into social policy and community development. Across the country, some African American churches mobilized voters to impact elections. Social change through voting has led to local black churches partnering with organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Urban black congregations have orchestrated social services activities, after-school programs in underserved communities, and recreation activities for youth (Smith 2003).

The black church's historical past is a clue to its future role. As Jonathan C. Augustine offers, "Contemporary perceptions within the Black Church parallel those of

the [Civil Rights] Movement, such that nonviolent and prophetic, political resistance has again become necessary" (2020, 107). Billingsley (1999) gives examples of pastors like Reverend Cecil L. Murray (retired) of First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, California; Reverend Dr. Gary V. Simpson of Concord Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York; and Reverend Dr. Jaqueline A. Thompson of Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, California to demonstrate how some black churches are engaging more directly in social reform. In the next section, I offer more examples of these and other examples to show a variety of nationwide black church social responses. This dissertation adds to this list examples of black churches addressing social reform through environmental injustice issues like energy efficiency, food access, and hazardous dumping. Others work to reduce energy costs by installing solar, such as Florida Avenue Baptist Church in Washington DC did in 2011, or to work on water pollution issues or neighborhood clean-up and revitalization. Black churches of various denominational affiliations or non-denominational affiliations have created programs to address unequal social and environmental conditions to support black social uplift and physical well-being, and many have joined together as part of the Environmental Initiative of the National Black Church Initiative.

Including environmental justice themes like food apartheid, air, soil, and water pollution, and community sustainability allows us to see how some predominately African American congregations are tackling environmental degradation that threatens their health and well-being - alongside the myriad of challenges faced by black Americans. This work unpacks how black churches work towards self-determination through environmental activism, addressing affordable and sustainable housing, and

access to healthy foods, clean air, water, and soil. Black religious institutions and black religious-affiliated institutions emerged as a means of forging community within an American context that sought to distance them from one another (Lincoln and Mamiya (1990). The social activities of black churches may be read as occasions for cultural preservation and communal support. If it is not already apparent, there is regional variation in how black churches evolved in relation to their communities. For instance, since most small churches could not support building expansions or ongoing support services, they primarily served as a "cultural broker, a mediating institution, to help acculturate rural migrants to the urban environment" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 121). Exclusion from white organizations facilitated the creation of black fraternities, sororities, and civil rights organizations, which often took shelter in local black churches. It is to church-affiliated community development corporations (CDCs) that I now turn my attention to articulating the role of some black churches in addressing social and environmental inequities.

Black Churches and Community Development

For over two centuries, black church-based development led the charge for African American political, social, economic advancement, or community development. However, there is little consensus on what "community development" means (McRoberts 2001).[18] Black-church-affiliated community development corporations (CDCs)

[18] Community development "is a process that unites the efforts of citizens with those of governmental authorities and private institutions to improve the physical, economic, and social conditions of communities, to integrate neighborhoods into the life of cities, and to enable them to contribute fully to the progress of cities" (Smith 2003, 215). In response to plantation slaveocracy, community development meant rallying enslaved blacks to resist the slave system and its supporters. In the north, community development referred to organizing mutual aid societies and organizations to serve the

coproduce public services with resources from the government or public and private companies to effect neighborhood change. This community development approach has been used to address the social needs of people of color, which includes alternative food systems and sustainable housing options, although often not labeled as environmental justice. Thus, I argue that an example like Trinity UCC's Endeleo Institute - the 501(c)(3) umbrella organization for Trinity's health, education, and community development - needs to be recognized for extending the notion of community development to include eco-conscious mixed-use "green" development. In Chapter 3, I offer a closer look at the Endeleo Institute and other church-affiliated organizations germane to a discussion on the role of black churches in environmental justice work. Churches interested in community development often establish nonprofit affiliates, though most institutions associated with black churches are not formally established (Webber 2001; Owens 2000). Some practical reasons for the autonomous black-church affiliated CDC are to protect the church's finances and assets and to manage the risk of legal or economic liabilities when leading large-scale development projects.[19]

Established CDCs like the Los Angeles Renaissance Development Corporation (First AME Church, Los Angeles, California), the Allen Temple Health & Social

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needs of poor blacks (McRoberts 2001). In the 1950s and 60s, community development became associated with socio-economic advancement through a focus on urban housing. The concept of community development may be defined and described by the response of some black churches to the social conditions of blacks at a particular time and place (McRoberts, 2001). To learn more about community development see: Rhonda Phillips and Robert Pittman. (2008). *An Introduction to Community Development.* See also Jim Cavaye. (2006) "Understanding community development." *Cavaye Community Development* 1: 1-19.

[19] To learn more about church-based CDC's see James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert. *The Community Development Reader*. New York:Routledge, 2012.

Services Ministry (Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, California), and the Concord Federal Credit Union (Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, NY) demonstrate how some black churches use free-standing or coalition-based CDCs to leverage the resources of their churches for socioeconomic and environmental stabilization of their neighborhoods (Owens 2000). Other relatively successful examples include Abyssinian Development Corporation (Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York, New York) and the Central Jersey Community Development Corporation (First Baptist Church at Lincoln Gardens, Somerset, New Jersey).

In partnership with local, state, and federal agencies, the Central Jersey CDC bought vacant lots and dilapidated housing to support revitalization. They created permanent homeownership opportunities for low-income residents. Rebuilding the neighborhood included housing, economic development, and reinvestment in park recreation (First Baptist Community Development Corporation 2005). At the Los Angeles Renaissance Development Corporation, the FAME Food Pantry provides fresh fruits and vegetables to residents. According to their website, “FAC [First AME Church] serves over 1,000,000 people annually by leveraging strong community-wide partnerships, agency relationships, and organizational collaborations to deliver relevant and culturally appropriate programs impacting people’s lives and improving the neighborhoods and communities they call home” (famechurch.org 2023). They also include affordable housing, free legal services, health services, and advocacy for smoke-free housing in local apartment complexes. Allen Temple Health & Social Services Ministry is addressing food inequities in Alameda County (California). They not only served as a food distribution center for East Oakland, an area hardest hit by COVID-19

but as a testing site (Allen Temple Baptist Church 2021). Allen Housing Development Fund Corporation (Allen A.M.E. Church, Queens, New York) spearheaded the development of more than 600 below-market-rate senior residential apartments, affordable housing units, and commercial real estate. Securing millions of dollars in financing, Abyssinian Development Corporation (Abyssinian Baptist Church, Harlem, New York) built "1244 units of affordable housing in 82 buildings. The majority of this has been targeted at very low and low-income families, the homeless, and senior citizens. Over 100 homeownership opportunities for moderate-income families have also been created" (Clark, Huxley, and Mountford 2010, 7).[20] Moreover, the Concord Baptist Church of Christ operates a Federal Credit Union, Freedom School, a 140-bed skilled nursing facility, a seniors' residence, an endowment for community uplift funded at $1 million, and most recently, helped eliminate $4 million in medical debt through a partnership with a local charity (Shalgar 2020).

Black churches have been central to black community development even before the proliferation of the CDC model. The Restoration Corporation, in Bedford Stuyvesant, New York, became the first CDC in the country, established in 1967. It represents a necessary step for churches to access public monies they did not have access to. According to Professor Michael L. Owens, "The specific purpose of the black church–affiliated CDC, which foundation grants, corporate equity investments, and government

[20] To learn more about the Abyssinian Development Corporation see: Crusoe, Nzingha. "Gentrification Or Revitalization: The Abyssinian Development Corporation and the Redevelopment of Harlem by Means of Racial Uplift." Order No. 10283073, Fordham University, 2017. http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gentrification-revitalization-abyssinian/docview/2117257574/se-2.

contracts often underwrite, is to reconstruct the physical, economic, and social environment of a targeted area or neighborhood" (2000, 170). Irrespective of denominational affiliation, some black congregations are involved in various facets of development because "poor blacks experience economic and social constraints as they suffer from a lack of transportation, decent housing, and a solid standard of education, the absence of healthcare, and so on" (Day 2012, 2). These congregations "are building housing and schools, operating credit unions and child care centers, and providing job training and transportation" (Webber 2001, 2). Yet, they often do not address their communities' physical environmental issues.

Studies of black church-affiliated CDCs describe creative ways some black churches address contextual crises which often exceed their capacity - in light of the reduction of social service programs at the government level (Billingsley 1999; Owens 2000; Littlefield 2005; Nash and Herring 2005; O'Leary et al. 2022). Black church-affiliated CDCs respond to market and political failures and link civil society with urban governance through advocacy, voter registration, and community organizing. As issues in urban black communities change, the role of church-based CDC is to stabilize the physical and social environment (Owens 2000). Such is the case for Mount Aery Baptist Church's Mount Aery Development Corporation in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which serves people in active addiction or the early stages of recovery. Additionally, a focus on communicable diseases led the church to establish the Ashe Faith Project, which provides a network of care to persons living with or affected by HIV/AIDS (www.mtaerybaptist.org/madc 2022). The multifaceted role of black churches in

community revitalization is illuminated, although programming differs depending upon the church's context.

Yet, as Keri Day (2012) points out in *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, the black church's response to social ills has often forsaken the particular realities of black women, especially poor black women. Black women's poverty and their experience in some black churches underscores the church's disconnectedness from local issues. On the one hand, some black churches have provided emotional, communal, and theological support while also being the site of oppression, as explored earlier in the section on black women in the church. Structural analysis of poor black women may get at economic and cultural roadblocks to social advancement beyond individual moral guilt. Black churches may offer more than hope through inspiring and uplifting sermons; they may assist in black women's thriving by advancing economic justice and cultural capital for black women. Addressing environmental justice concerns is directly related to this—in instances like Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, Jesus People Against Pollution in Columbia Mississippi, or the Newtown Florist Club in Gainesville, Georgia, because it was the women in the churches who noticed the illnesses and cancers, in part because they were actively involved in care-taking ministries and funeral planning, that gave evidence of toxic contamination. The women leaders in these communities later became recognized as pioneers in the environmental justice movement.

By purchasing dilapidated buildings and transforming them into restaurants, retail shops, and offices, some black churches are securing the social, economic, and environmental future of low-income and blighted communities. As a vehicle for

neighborhood-based redevelopment, CDCs demonstrate the black church's institutional creativity, its mission to continue its role in offering services, and its proactivity to create organizational infrastructures to address future needs. As new social issues arise due to increased urbanization, CDCs may facilitate unique programs to address burgeoning needs through public and private partnerships. Through partnerships with local and federal agencies they may also provide remedies to context-specific environmental issues.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have provided a historical framework that showcases the resilience of black churches. They have emerged as an extension of African traditional religions, a response to white oppressive systems, and an evolving institution in light of current social ills. Black churches, despite the challenges, are poised to respond to environmental injustice within their contexts today. The growing number of black churches nationwide engaged in environmental activism signals a need for more studies to expand the imagination of their role in ecological engagement. While black church studies have expanded to include varying degrees of black church community and economic development, the discipline stops short of prioritizing sub-themes like urban environmental injustice and how some black churches are addressing environmental issues within their context (Littlefield 2005). However, Edwards and Jones (2019) and Jayachandran (2022) who have worked to integrate community and economic development with the environment, and thus, are exceptions. In addition, Anthony Pinn's "Of God, Money, and Earth: The Black Church on Economics and Environmental Racism" (2001) deserves recognition since it explores the role of black churches in

addressing the impacts of environmental racism within black communities. For Pinn, black economic development supports just communities and ensures access to healthy food services, housing, and employment because socioeconomic conditions are a factor in environmental conditions. He writes, "Black churches are beginning to recognize the links between poverty and exposure to ecological damage. And, giving attention to the growing environmental racism movement, they are beginning to educate black Christians about the importance of linking economic progress to concern for the natural environment" (2001, 61). Yet, calls for more black churches to include the environment as a feature of their social justice activism continue. The lack of black church environmental engagement led Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll, Sr. to establish Green the Church, an Oakland-based organization that educates and facilitates black church environmental engagement. More will be said about Green the Church in Chapter 3. Historical economic inequality has resulted in continued financial hardship for blacks more than their white counterparts. At the local and denominational levels, black church activism includes economics, politics, and social mobility for changing black communities' social landscape, including environmental exposure.

Environmental injustice excessively plagues black communities, as confirmed statistically and reported in the United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice's "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" (1987) and "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: Why Race Still Matters After All of These Years" (Bullard 2008), discussed in the following chapter. Black neighborhoods are targeted more frequently as sites for environmentally unjust practices than non-Hispanic white communities. Notwithstanding, James Cone's "Whose Earth Is It Anyway" (2000) and Dianne D.

Glave's Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage (2010) and "The Green Confessions of Nat Turner" (2016) call black scholars to include environmental justice as a critical theme in African American life.

Utilizing community development corporations as a means for social and environmental uplift, partnerships between churches like St. Luke Baptist Church, Dupont Park Seventh Day Adventist Church, and the Department of Energy and Environment have made free solar power available to residents who meet requirements (Ellfedlt 2019). Others, like Trinity UCC, use solar panels as one aspect of greening their ministries. Their Imani Village project is being developed with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building rating system.[21] As I have elucidated, these efforts help us understand the potential role of black churches in black self-determination in light of anti-black environmental practices. Additionally, they denote how black churches have historically responded to black social ills.

Using a cooperative approach, some churches partner with local green-tech companies, nonprofits, and local and federal government agencies to sustain clean energy projects in their communities. Interfaith Power & Light, and Groundswell are two nonprofits that partner with religious institutions for energy-saving solutions. As pillars of the community, religious institutions are excellent sources for leveraging residents' trust and spearheading solar projects (Ellfedlt 2019). Expanding the scope of black churches' role in community and economic development to include environmental activism will shed light on how "Religious institutions are long-standing community

[21] To learn more about LEED building certification see: *LEED Rating System.* 2024. United States Green Building Council. https://www.usgbc.org/leed

anchors…which makes them ideal partners for developers struggling to connect low-income households with clean energy" and sustainable practices (Ellfedlt 2019). In this way, paying attention to black church ecological engagement in black church studies will fill a gap in black church literature, as argued in this chapter, and argue for more black churches to assume an environmental justice approach, covered in the next chapter, that fosters an alternative vision for their community. Now, I turn to elucidate the beginnings of the environmental justice movement with a look at watershed moments like the Warren County protests, which helped the development of an environmental justice paradigm connecting social justice and the environment. I also illuminate black and black religious, environmental engagement to highlight the ongoing efforts of African Americans to address environmental injustice.

CHAPTER TWO

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

The phenomena of black churches as institutions birthed in the caldron of the antebellum South shapes their role in society (DuBois 1903; Raboteau 2004; Pollard and Duncan et al. 2016). At its inception, black churches offered enslaved Africans and African Americans a sense of autonomy and a space for cultural preservation. The natural environment held social significance for enslaved Africans and African-Americans. The wilderness was a place of prayer and religious gatherings; clandestine meetings; a source of food, a hiding place from slaveholders, and safer routes for permanent escape. In response to post-emancipation era and the Great Migration, some black churches evolved to address black crises of their times. Dependent on their theology, congregational size, and financial capacity, some black churches addressed social ills that unjustly affected black communities (Sernett 1997). An exploration of some of today's most pressing issues affecting black lives helps illuminate a path to the response of some churches to environmentally racist policies and practices, or environmental injustice.

As stated in the prior chapter, today, through independently run social programs like medical screening and advice, food pantries, clothing closets, children's nurseries and daycares, some black churches are servicing their members and community residents. Other black churches are utilizing CDCs to partner with federal agencies that expand their capacity for social change. Recognizing financial constraints on so many in black communities, combining the "eco" of economy with the "eco" of ecology, some scholars of black religious studies and black church studies are connecting the role of black

churches to the environment (Pinn 2001; Glave 2004). In this way, they are providing a fuller description of churches efforts to correct anti-black environmental violence and reclaim narratives of ecological activism that have been predominately colonized by whiteness and have often been depicted in primarily secular terms.

In this chapter, I trace the beginnings and development of the environmental justice movement from the Memphis Sanitation Worker's Strike in 1968 to the 1982 protests in Warren County, North Carolina, to the development of an environmental justice paradigm that furthers environmental equality. But it is important to define what is meant by environmental justice and environmental injustice - and the particular ways urban areas and those living in urban places are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. Both environmental justice and environmental injustice refer to "the disproportionate exposure of communities of color and the poor to pollution, and its concomitant effects on health and environment, as well as the unequal environmental protection and environmental quality provided through laws, regulations, governmental programs, enforcement, and policies" (Maantay 2002, 161). According to attorney Ben Crump (2020), what makes something an environmental injustice issue is when a set of actions causes harm upon the environment and particular groups or communities based upon race or ethnic identity or socio-economic status. Environmental injustice constitutes direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional decisions and actions that result in environmental burdens unevenly distributed along the lines of race, income, and other social identifiers that contributes to disparate environmental amenities like fewer parks and green spaces, racialized zoning decisions, poor infrastructure, and unsustainable housing.

But there is perhaps a longer history of describing environmental justice issues, and that may have roots in the religious sphere. Therefore, I discuss religious environmentalism to narrate the role of religion and their institutions in promoting environmental justice. I offer an analysis of black religious environmental activism to lift up the narratives and responses of people of color to anti-black environmentalism. In this way, the story of American environmental activism is expanded by the lived experiences and responses of those most adversely impacted by unfair environmental practices.

BEGINNINGS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

The modern-day environmental justice movement is often said to have started with the Warren County, North Carolina, anti-toxic waste dump protests. However, calls for black environmental-related justice began earlier than the 1980s, and the term eco-justice was already in use in the 1970s.[22] The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s included an environmental agenda on the heels of city-wide protests in Memphis, Tennessee, following the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, sanitation workers with the Department of Public Works (DPW). The appearance of the civil rights movement's charismatic leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., brought national attention and connected the movement's themes of social and racial equality with

[22] According to Michael Moody, the term "eco-justice" may find its roots in a gathering of young American Baptist leaders who kept making connections between ecological issues and social justice goals. To learn more, see: Michael Moody." Caring for Creation: Environmental Advocacy by Mainline Protestant Organizations," in The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism, Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 239.

environmental equality (Bullard 2001; Steinwand 2017).[23] With widespread support from Memphis sanitation workers, sympathizers, and King's organizational ties, the intersection of black environmental health, race, and class came front and center. After prior black union-organized demonstrations in Memphis, Reverend James M. Lawson, pastor of the Centenary Methodist Church, led 1,300 black sanitation workers to strike for increased pay and better working conditions.[24] The Sanitation Workers Strike in 1968 broadened civil rights campaigns to include economic and environmental fairness. Scholars like Steve Estes (2000) and Jason Sokol (2018) link the sanitation workers' pay demands to King's Poor People's Campaign for economic and racial justice – and thus King's consent to visit Memphis – but they fall short of naming the strike as being as much about environmental hazards and jeopardized black public health as it was economical and racial fairness (Bullard 2004; Zimring 2016).

In *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (2007), Michael K. Honey, professor of humanities, writes about how the disparate conditions black and white sanitation workers were exposed to signal a color line that was apparent as "almost everyone working in sanitation was black, except the bosses. Hauling garbage was the kind of work the city assigned to blacks only" (2007, 2).

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[23] In, *Growing Smarter: Achieving Livable Communities, Environmental Justice, and Regional Equity* (Bullard 2007), the author suggests King's values "were deeply rooted in Protestant morality and expressed in a highly idiosyncratic form of racial and local identity in the black church service" (111). The church was a vehicle through which he exercised his personal values and sought socio-structural change.

[24] Rev. James M. Lawson founded Community on the Move for Equality (COME), which helped galvanize black residents in support of the sanitation workers. At his invitation, Rev. Dr. King, Jr. came to speak in Memphis where he delivered his famous "Mountaintop" speech at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ ("James Lawson" 2019).

Segregationist ideologies were apparent in unsafe working conditions and unjust policies that impacted job access, quality of life, social mobility, and inequitable environmental exposure (Pellow 2004; Zimring 2016). The DPW was rife with black labor exploitation, which helped cement a black lower class that inordinately suffered from acute and chronic illness due to exposure to waste and toxic substances (Honey 2007). These conditions disproportionately exposed black workers to environmental harm more than their white counterparts.

The deaths of Cole and Walker in 1968 were a tipping point for the sanitation workers since the DPW was aware that some of the garbage trucks had malfunctioning hydraulic rams that would initiate compacting contents in the truck's body on their own. A history of unfair working conditions, low pay, exposure to human and hazardous waste material without proper equipment, known faulty garbage trucks, the deaths of four garbage haulers, two in 1964 and two in 1968, and the City's abysmal response signaled race, class, and environmental injustice and ignited the strike (Sokol 2001; Berkley 2011). Generally, sanitation workers handled more than 2,500 tons of garbage daily; however, less than a tenth of Memphis garbage was collected the day of the strike – February 12, 1968 (Honey 2007). Trash began piling up in downtown Memphis and surrounding neighborhoods. One report suggests that by February 14, more than 10,000 tons of garbage had piled up along Memphis streets (AFSCME 2023). By King's arrival in March, strikers had already galvanized enough support to debilitate the City's refuse collection efforts. On April 16, 1968, the City Council granted the union recognition and better wages (Wynn 2018). Eventually, national media attention on the sanitation

worker's strike decreased, yet other efforts for racial, economic, and environmental justice occurred.

The Love Canal disaster (1976-1978), where chemical leaching into homes had led to health crises like asthma and epilepsy, brought the production and disposal of toxic waste materials to the forefront of environmental conversations (Szasz 1994; Brulle and Pellow 2006). In 1979, African American homeowners in Houston, Texas, protested a proposed landfill, which became one of the first lawsuits to challenge environmental discrimination using civil rights law (Bullard 1983; 1993). In Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc., (482 F. Supp. 673 (S.D. Tex. 1979) residents charged the city with environmental discrimination since, for more than fifty years, black neighborhoods had been targeted as sites for landfills and waste facilities. Except for a facility in a Latino neighborhood and another near a predominately white neighborhood, between 1920 and 1970, all five of the city's owned landfills and six (of eight) waste facilities were located in black neighborhoods, instantiating "significant statistical evidence that indicated a history of locating municipal waste disposal facilities in Houston's African American neighborhoods" (Bullard 1993, 325). The judge did not rule in favor of the residents on the grounds of intent; however, the lawsuit is significant in that it was "the inspiration for the legal piece to the environmental justice movement" (Cole 1994, 523). This case influenced future environmental justice protests and lawsuits by using civil rights law and claims of unequal protection to prevent environmental racism. It also

pointed to a pattern that existed across the country—the placement of landfills and toxic waste sites in communities of color.[25]

Historical markers like the sanitation workers strike in 1968 and the Houston resident's lawsuit in 1979 paved the way for the 1982 protests against toxic waste in Warren County, North Carolina, which, by many, is heralded as the birthplace of the modern-day environmental justice movement (Cole & Foster 2001; Schlosberg 2007). Like earlier protests, Warren County residents' resistance to a proposed landfill signaled the convergence of a political issue - environmental injustice - broad-based organizational support, public protests, and the emergence of a new frame - environmental racism, as well as religious involvement (McGurty 2009; Bullard 1993, 2007; Mohai, Pellow and Roberts 2009). What was significant about this instance is that more than 500 people were arrested in the first major demonstration against environmental injustice specifically.[26] Many of those people were black church people. The protests and arrests brought national attention to the issue of environmental injustice

[25] In June 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice launched an environmental justice investigation brought on by residents of Trinity/Houston Gardens, neighborhoods in the city's Northeast section, alleging the City of Houston neglected to respond to illegal dumping in these predominately black and Latino communities - a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits federal fund recipients from discriminating based on race, color or national origin (Nakamura 2022). As of June 6, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a press release noting a settlement was reached after a ten-month investigation. The City's One Clean Houston Initiative addresses illegal dumping and improved waste management services. To learn more about the residential complaint and resolution, see Resolution Agreement Between the United States of America and The City of Houston Department of Justice, Number 171-74-36.

[26] The roots of the environmental justice movement are contested since the origin of any social movement is difficult to identify because of prior efforts that provide the backbone for present activities (McGurty 2009).

and how black communities were intentionally targeted to bear the burden of environmentally racist decisions.

The background of the massive protest was that polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) removed from the Ward Transformer Company in Raleigh were dumped in 1978 along 240 shoulder miles of secondary roads in remote sections of the Fort Bragg Military Reservation (McGurty 1997).[27] PCBs were primarily used in industrial and commercial applications, including electrical and hydraulic equipment, oil-based paint, plastics, and carbonless copy paper (Fears and Dennis 2021). According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, potential health effects of human exposure to PCBs include birth defects, cancer, neurological, and reproductive and immune system compromise (2022).[28] To avoid increasing disposal costs, executives of Ward contracted others to illegally dispose of contaminated liquid alongside rural roads (Fears and Dennis 2021; Atwater 2022). The state of North Carolina, confronted with the cleanup of the illegal dumping, proposed the construction of a landfill in rural Warren County. Construction started on the landfill in 1982 in a predominantly black and poor community selected as the site for the toxic dumping of 30,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with PCBs. Residents, civil rights groups, and religious leaders protested, citing groundwater contamination and potential decline in economic development. An

[27] To learn more about Ward Transformer Company dumping see: United States v. Ward, 618 F. Supp. 884 (E.D.N.C. 1985)

[28] Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) may be absorbed by humans and animals through the skin, lungs, and gastrointestinal tract. There is evidence that PCBs are carcinogenic and may result in rare liver cancers and malignant melanoma. Environmental exposure has led to decreased reproductivity in land and aquatic creatures (Borja et al. 2005).

unsuccessful three-year struggle ensued to prevent landfill construction (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, and Wright 1987; McGurty 2009).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT PARADIGM

It was not until1984 that national leaders like Rev. Benjamin Chavis, executive director of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ (UCC), joined protestors making the local campaign a national event.[29] Notwithstanding, it was Dollie Burwell, a resident of Warren County, who leveraged her relationships with religiously affiliated organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and congressional leaders like Walter Fauntroy (District of Columbia, D), allowing her to call on others to rally support against the proposed site. As Ms. Burwell recounts, women of color put their bodies in the path of dump trucks, with men standing alongside them, in protest against proposed dumping (Fears and Dennis 2021).[30] It was her church, Coley

[29] The Warren County Citizens Concerned about PCBs, the grassroots organization formed to prevent the proposed landfill, reassessed their strategy after unsuccessful attempts to prevent the landfill. McGurty writes: “The initial protest in Warren County began typically, as a narrowly defined, self- interested response to a local threat: "We don't want that facility in our backyards." Residents were primarily concerned with public health repercussions from potential groundwater contamination and negative economic impacts of a waste facility near their homes” (1997, 307) Thus, “Fear of losing control over a local decision motivated Concerned Citizens to change their strategy to direct action and to build a coalition with civil rights activists” (1997, 310). Garnering the attention of Rev. Leon White, then director of the North Carolina office of the UCC’s, led to Rev. Benjamin Chavis’ involvement.

[30] The role of black women in environmentalism like Dollie Burwell, often goes unheard. Black women assembled by Burwell, cooked and fed protestors alongside creating and distributing fliers, and cold-calling residents to increase participation. For more see: Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and And Diana Taylor. 1997. *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right*. Hanover: University Press of New England. Faith leaders like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and churches like Coley Springs Baptist Church played a significant role in shaping the movement providing a

Springs Baptist Church (Rev. Luther Brown, Pastor), that would become the headquarters for the movement. Building broad-based support through social networks and alliances, collective action soon took shape (McGurty 2000) with hundreds being arrested, many for lying down in the path of the dumptrucks. Inspired by this campaign, the UCC commissioned the 1987 *Toxic Wastes and Race In the United States,* which used statistical analysis to show the connection racial and socio-economic characteristics of communities with hazardous waste sites across the country.

The report examines relationships between race, socioeconomic status and hazardous waste disposal, and documented the predominance of racism's impact on environmental health hazards more than income, home ownership, or property value. According to the report, there were nearly 20,000 uncontrolled toxic waste sites in the country threatening to leach into municipal groundwater.[31] Mapping those sites and the racial and economic demographics of the surrounding neighborhood, the relationship between the siting of commercial hazardous waste facilities and uncontrolled toxic waste sites in racial and ethnic and economically distressed communities became disturbingly

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theological and social framework for environmental equality or physical space for grassroots groups to meet and strategize.

[31] *Toxic Wastes and Race* reports on racial and socio-economics in relation to commercial hazardous waste facilities, which accepts waste materials from a third party for a fee; and uncontrolled toxic waste sites, which refers to closed and abandoned sites on the EPA's list of sites. For more see: "Hazardous Waste Management Facilities and Units" United States Environmental Protection Agency. Accessed October 8, 2022. https://www.epa.gov/hwpermitting/hazardous-waste-management-facilities-and-units. See also "Hazardous-Waste Sites: Priority Health Conditions and Research Strategies -- United States" CDC. Accessed October 8, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00016025.htm.

clear.[32] The report states, “Communities with the greatest number of commercial hazardous waste facilities had the highest composition of racial and ethnic residents. In communities with two or more facilities or one of the nation's five largest landfills, the average minority percentage of the population was more than three times that of communities without facilities (38 percent vs 12 percent)” (1997, xiii).

The Warren County protests, and the subsequent campaigns changed the environmental movement such that by the year 2000 nearly four hundred environmental justice groups were addressing environmental risks targeted at minority and poor communities. The landmark First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 and the SouthWest Organizing Project’s demands for increased diversity in environmental organizations and centering the voices and environmental experiences of people of color redefined the meaning of environment to include “where we live, work, and play” (Novotny 2002, 35), and drew attention to the lack of diversity in the environmental movement’s leadership and failure to address issues of environmental racism (Durlin 2010; Pinderhughes 1996). Organizations like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and government agencies like the Office of Environmental Justice at the EPA, and Housing and Urban Development’s Office of Community

[32] While African Americans are primarily and systematically targeted to bear the brunt of environmental hazards, they are not alone. Latino’s and Native Americans share some of this burden too. According to Charles Lee, the 1987 Toxic Waste and Race report “changed the terms of the debate on issues of race and the environment and placed on the map the heretofore invisible issue of disproportionate environmental contamination in poor communities and communities of color” (1995). Bullard provides examples of predominately black and brown communities like South Central Los Angeles, California, and Kettleman City, California, respectively, where hazardous waste incinerators were proposed and the efforts of citizens to resist environmental hazard by creating grassroots organizations like the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles to defeat toxic proposals (Bullard 1993).

Planning and Development added environmental justice-related issues like lead abetment and brownfield remediation to their list of concerns. The establishment of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (1993) and Executive Order 12898 (1994) signed by President Bill Clinton, gave the appearance that environmental justice was taken seriously (McGurty 2009).[33]

Warren County was a watershed moment in environmental history giving birth to the term *environmental racism,* which refers to "Racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the ecology movements" (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009, 406). Warren County was not the first time residents protested environmental hazards, but it marked the first time "opponents of a hazardous waste landfill were arrested for civil disobedience, people of color were involved in a disruptive collective action against environmental regulatory agencies, and national-level civil rights activists supported an environmental issue through disruptive collective action" (McGurty 2009, 7). These protests signaled a change in the collective identity of the

[33] Executive Order 12898 directed federal agencies to address environmental and human health impacts of federal decisions on low-income and communities of color, develop environmental justice strategies, and provide underserved communities with greater access to public participation in environmental decision making. To learn more, see: US EPA, O. P. 2013. "Summary of Executive Order 12898 - Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations." https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-executive-order-12898-federal-actions-address-environmental-justice.

environmental movement and strategy. What emerged was an understanding of *environmental justice* as responses by individuals and grassroots organizations to environmentally unjust practices that have targeted the economically, politically, racially and socially disadvantaged. According to Charles Lee, a key researcher for the UCC *Toxic Wastes and Race* studies, "environmental justice is a critique of traditional views of environmentalism, science, and social policy" (1995, 571). As a theoretical paradigm it connects social justice and the environment, and addresses injustices caused by structural evils like institutional racism (Taylor 2000).

Although historically, minority communities were involved in improving the environmental conditions of their communities, their efforts were not labeled as environmental activism. Efforts to secure quality housing, reduce waste and trash, clear vacant lots and rehabilitate dilapidated buildings, were categorized as community organizing or neighborhood development. But, an environmental racism frame "constructed the siting problem as a threat to local health, environment, and economy that had been forced upon the citizens by an uncaring and too powerful government in collaboration with industrial capital" (McGurty 2009, 78). Warren County was a game-changer as it highlighted the reality that predominantly black communities - which lacked political and economic power - were unduly targeted for environmental destruction. Further, it was a game changer in heightening church awareness of the need to respond to these inequalities.

Sociologist Robert Bullard had already been documenting the pattern identified in the UCC Toxic Wastes and Race 1987 report, in his *Dumping in Dixie* (1990), which examined hazardous facility and patterns of spatial segregation in the U.S. By linking

institutional racism with the siting of environmental waste facilities, he described how black communities were disproportionately targeted as locations for incinerators, landfills, and other dangerous materials. Consequently, the health of communities of color is significantly jeopardized as evidenced in contaminated air, water, and soil, and lead poising in children.[34] As a result of his groundbreaking work, e*nvironmental justice* studies expanded to convey the dimensions of unjust treatment of the environmental health of blacks, and all people of color, (Bryant 1995; Cole & Foster 2001; Taylor 2009, 2014; and Washington 2019). Thus, an environmental justice lens offers a vision for healthy and sustainable communities in light of unjust environmental planning. Black environmental activism often includes sub-themes like improved housing conditions (as far back as the 1800s slave economy and 1900s migration to Northern cities), land acquisition, opposing segregated public parks and beaches (1940s, 50s, and 60s), and pesticide prevention and opposing toxic facilities (1980s). Since the environment encompasses where we live, work, and play, discourse on environmental risks and public health are centered in an environmental justice framework that recognizes racial discrimination existent in education, housing, employment, healthcare, and voting rights conflates to the environment as well. Robert Figueroa, professor of environmental justice, and Claudia Mills, professor emerita of philosophy, expand this definition by noting that there are two dimensions to environmental justice: distributive and participatory.

[34] More often, race is the primary factor in citing environmental pollutants; inequities in wealth, housing and real estate, and land use planning are also significant factors in how ecological inequities occur in the United States. According to Tessum et al. exposure to fine particulate matter "is disproportionately caused by consumption of goods and services mainly by the non-Hispanic white majority, but disproportionately inhaled by black and Hispanic minorities" (2019, 6001). Therefore, white populations possess air, water, and soil pollution advantages over black and minority persons.

Distributive justice, which invites an examination of how environmental burdens and benefits are distributed along the lines of race, class, and geography; and participatory justice, which examines the decision-making processes and policies that support such environmental distributions (2001, 427-428).

The modern-day environmental justice movement emerged in three phases: (1) Warren County, North Carolina protests, which led to the first national study of race and hazardous waste siting, the *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* report; (2) the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit of 1991, which addressed environmental racism in communities of color and resulted in the adoption of *17 Principles of Environmental Justice* and issuance of Executive Order 12898 by President Bill Clinton in 1994; (3) and focus on creating healthy and sustainable communities (Lee 1995; Fader and McCarthy 2001). The three phrases describe the changing debates and emphasis within the movement. While early environmental justice advocates focused on the disproportionate siting of toxic waste facilities, the movement now includes "the built environment (facilities siting, housing, parks and recreation); worker health and safety; and waste, pollution, exposure, and toxics." (Agyeman, Schlosberg, Craven, and Matthews 2016, 327). The adaptive environmental justice framework, for the authors, has been critical to bridging the environmental and social justice gap to include issues like human rights, genocide, and climate change. Others also push for expansions; Merlin Chowkwanyun's *Environmental Justice: Where It Has Been, and Where It Might Be Going* (2023) invites environmental justice scholars to examine more closely the intersection of environmental issues on tribal lands, environmental justice and climate justice, the forces that cause disparate environmental degradation, and a more accurate

account of urban environmentalism. Finally, environmental labor exploitation of people living in developing countries, and racial inequalities related to the impact and recovery from natural disasters, like what we saw with Hurricane Katrina, illustrates the growing influence of environmental justice discourse.

RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmentally unjust policies and practices prey on vulnerable communities to the extent they are subject to economic and social divestment, inadequate education and healthcare services, reduced access to living-wage employment, and undue environmental exposure. These inequities impact how communities of color experience "nature" and their environments. Unlike the majority of predominately white communities, black neighborhoods continue to struggle against unwanted land uses, and illegal dumping operations. Emerging themes like global warming, food apartheid, and renewable energy, have drawn the attention of religious and non-religious community groups to advocate for environmental justice. Black led environmental groups like Hip Hop Caucus, Project Eats, and the Black Dirt Farm Collective fight for climate action, food justice, and sustainable agriculture, respectively. In partnership with some black churches and their institutions, organizations like Faith in Place, Green the Church, GreenFaith, Creation Justice Ministries, and Interfaith Power and Light, are implementing programs that address land use, water preservation, tree planting, and climate change in predominately people of color neighborhoods.

Present-day religious environmental activism focused on food security through connecting churches with black farmers, such as at Trinity UCC - Chicago, Illinois; Conetoe Family Life Center - Conetoe, North Carolina, and the Black Church Food

Security Network - Baltimore, Maryland, are examples of particular grassroots efforts that seek to remedy anti-black environmentalism, and racist agricultural policies. The Conetoe Family Life Center, under the pastorate of Reverend Richard Joyner, which began as a community garden/farm initiative in rural North Carolina, now addresses food sustainability for a community that has an average household income of $21,000 (Duke 2023).[35] Other religious environmental justice advocates like Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III, founder of the Black Church Food Security Network, are also creating community gardens, addressing hypertension, and reclaiming ancestral heritage as a part of their paradigm. More will be shared concerning Rev. Dr. Brown's food security initiatives in Chapter 3. Leaders such as Rev. William Barber II of the Poor People's campaign, first initiated by ML King and the SCLC, also point to the high health costs for workers, often of color, in how industrial, agricultural and meat is produced and its effects on those living near these facilities, which are often people of color (McAlevey 2018; Southern Environmental Law Center 2022).

For some scholars, religious environmental justice engagement springboards from historical events like the Sanitation Workers Strike in 1968 and the 1982 protests in Warren County (Cole & Foster 2001; Honey 2007). Others discuss how this dovetailed with eco-justice initiatives coming out of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group (NCC EJWG), founded in 1983, which included representatives of the historical black denominations mentioned in the introductory chapter (Kearns 2014). On-the-ground public protests helped to increase national awareness of environmental

[35] To put this in perspective, according to the US Census Bureau, the median household income in North Carolina is $66,186 (2022).

inequality and reports like the 1987 *Toxic Waste and Race* report, sponsored by the UCC Commission for Racial Justice, documented the realities of disproportionate black exposure to environmental hazards. The UCC report was the first national report that documented the siting of hazardous waste facilities in the U.S., identifying race as the chief predictor, and it was issued by a Christian denomination. NCC-EJWG worked to bring the situation documented by the report, and by environmental justice organizations like the SouthWest Organizing Project, to the attention of communities across the country (Kearns 2014).

The Commission's role as "a national church-based civil rights agency" (1987, X) and their report illustrated one way that religious groups played a role in environmentalism. In "Ecology and Religious Environmentalism in the United States," Gould and Kearns (2018), describe the interplay between religion, nature, ecology, and environment. They tell the history of religion and the environment as a two-strand phenomena. First, is the long history of "spiritual *reverence for nature* as inherently sacred" (1) and second, is the history of religious environmental activism in the 20th-century. Since the 1960s and 70s, much of religious environmentalism has been closely connected to social justice and civil rights activism among liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. According to Kearns (1996), however, conservatives have tended to embrace "stewardship" and "creation care" language to support their environmental advocacy which in its early years, rarely mentioned justice, and this is still a suspect word in many conservative Christian circles. Basing attitudes on theological orientation can be misleading however, as Black Protestants, who respond similarly to white evangelicals/conservative Christians on theological measures in surveys, are among the

most concerned, and justice is the prevailing language used to describe their concern (Noguiera-Godsey, Kearns and Bauman 2024). Predominantly, religious environmentalism finds its roots in social justice activism and is evidenced at the denominational levels of the church.[36] While at the congregational level, the justice aspect is not always as clear, as there are many ways that congregations seek to address environmental issues.

Religious environmental activism often includes a range of small and large activities from bible studies and Christian education classes on creation care to institutional practices ranging from recycling to solar upgrades. According to Gould and Kearns, "Religious environmentalist activism whether at the congregational, denominational, or national level is clearly rooted in earlier, religiously grounded social reform movements, but extends the conceptual reach of these reforms to include both the health of nature itself and the many ways in which environmental degradation directly impacts human health and well-being, often disproportionally along race, class, and gender lines" (2018, 2). Within religious contexts, a moral basis for action is offered that frames humans' relationship to the environment. As I shared earlier, the gathering of black church leaders across denominations at the National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit drew upon some black churches' history of justice to "affirm the unitary nature of life and commit ourselves to the ministry of converging

[36] The term *ecology* "denotes integrated systems within which humans are just one species among many" (Gould and Kearns 2018). In relation to *environment*, which implies "the conceptual separation of humans from the biophysical world," the former term underscores the interrelatedness of all created species. It is worth noting that religious environmental activism appears in non-Christian religious traditions. Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs all offer religious perspectives on the environment and its relationship to humankind.

justice and environmental issues" (1993). This is the context of some black churches environmental justice activism that is the focus on this dissertation.

Organizations like the NCC-EJWG and religiously affiliated environmental events like the 1991 First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drew nationwide attention to growing environmental justice discourse. The literature on religious environmentalism, which is a subset of the field of religion and ecology, which has mainly focused on religious attitudes toward nature, or eco-theological discussions, expanded thanks to increased interest in field-related activities.[37] Contributions from scholars like Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim's eleven volume series on *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment*, that covered all the major world religions, indigenous traditions, and animals (1998–2003), or Roger Gottlieb's *This Sacred Earth* (1995), helped shape the field. *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, edited by Carol J. Adams in 1993 brought together a range of key eco-feminist voices, including womanist Delores Williams, that were already making the connection between the earth with the female body and the exploitation of the two. These latter two volumes are significant in that they included black voices on the environment. *Worldviews, Religion and the Environment: An Anthology*, edited by Richard C. Foltz in 2003 surveys all of the major world religions' perspectives on contemporary ecological issues. In all three editions of *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology* (Bauman, Bohannon II, and O'Brien 2010), a range of authors explore relationships between the environment and religious beliefs and practices from scholars of religion and

37 According to Bullard et al. (2011), by 1998, religious environmental justice engagement included a "Toxic Tour of Cancer Alley" with national church leaders representing more than 17 million African Americans (102).

ecology, including some attention to issues of race and racism. Yet most of these volumes focused primarily on predominantly white or Asian environmentalism. In *To Love the Wind and the Rain:" African Americans and Environmental History*, Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (2005) expand the discourse on religion and the environment through an exploration of the relationship between African Americans and the environment in the United States, which Glave unpacked in more depth in *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming African Environmental Heritage* (2010). Ethicist and eco-theologian Melanie L. Harris, following the work of Alice Walker, connects environmentalism with black women's experience coining *ecowomanism* (following Walker's womanism) as an interdisciplinary pursuit that brings together black women's religion and their conceptions of the earth. In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (2017), and her edited volume *Ecowomanism: Earth Honoring Faiths* (Brill 2016) she amplifies the voices of black women and their environmental engagement.[38]

On the ground, religious environmental activism has been evidenced before the late 1980s, strategizing, collaborating with interfaith and non-religious partners, and framing environmental conversations in terms of a justice narrative. Kearns (2012) states, "those involved are motivated by justice concerns, because justice is a central motif of most religious traditions, and because the justice dimensions of environmental issues resonate within and across religious traditions" (593). Religious involvement brings a moral aspect to environmental issues, rather than solely scientific terms. Applying sacred

[38] "Womanist" was first conceptualized and defined in Alice Walker's 1979 essay, "Coming Apart." A fuller definition is provided in her 1983 piece, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose" where she identifies the term as a black feminist.

authorization that legitimates their actions, religions "provide motivating symbols, songs, rituals, and testimonies, invaluable for the success of social movements" (Immergut and Kearns 2012, 186). Religious affiliated environmental organizations like the UCC Network for Economic and Environmental Resources and GreenFaith help form "a distinct strand of religious environmentalism more commonly referred to as eco-justice" (Immergut and Kearns 2012, 178). Here, "ecological wholeness and justice" (182) intertwine to promote justice for all of the created order. This focus on justice is a key element of black religious environmentalism although the role of black churches in environmental justice has been understudied. Black churches have played a significant role in environmental justice, eco-justice and environmental sub themes because they offer "powerful moral pulpits and networking tools" (Toffolon-Weiss & Roberts 2005, 83). An exploration of their role in environmental justice will bridge the gap in scholarship which has continued to bifurcate black religion and environmentalism. Now, I turn to black environmental engagement.

BLACK ENVIRONMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Environmental justice discourse and activism allow all those who are inequitably impacted by unjust environmental practices to share their experiences and fight for self-reclamation. Veronica Kyle, former director of Faith in Place, created programs like Migration & Me, which she described in our interview to raise the voices of black and brown folk in environmentalism.[39] This program centers on personal migration stories

[39] The Chicago-based environmental justice non-profit, Faith in Place, provides resources to educate people of diverse faith communities to advance environmental and social justice. Their programs focus on climate change and energy, sustainable food and land use, water preservation, and environmental advocacy. Veronica Kyle's Migration & Me offered a story-circle style gathering of African American and Mexican American

and connects them with the needs of migrating species like monarch butterflies and birds. In doing so, black people's stories of environmental engagement and their perception of nature are expanded (Kyle and Kearns 2018). How black people engage with the environment has been shaped by historical events like slavery and the mass movement of southern rural blacks to the urban north. Glave (2010), Harris (2016b), previously mentioned, and Dorecta Taylor (2016), in *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*, offer stories to counter myths of black environmental disengagement and convey that black folk are environmentally active too. Although people of color have exercised environmental agency, their voices are muffled by "whiteness," which conflates the movement to white environmentalism and dismisses the ways people of color contribute to environmental activism. Yet, they have a deep history of caring about the environment.

As I stated in Chapter 1, black environmental history begins with African cosmologies, forced migration, and enslavement - Africans carried with them environmental epistemologies from their native lands (Woldeyes and Belachew 2021). It was the enslaved Africans' prior knowledge and experience in the environment that enabled them to thrive on plantations and navigate escape with celestial and natural elements as their compass. Religious services occurred in woods and forests, reflecting a recognition of nature as a sacred space. But bad things happened in the woods also: lynchings and ways to make people "disappear," never to be seen again. An

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participants who shared their earliest memories and experiences of nature – good and bad – to explain more fully peoples of color interaction with nature. Through storytelling, Veronica, sought to correct misperceptions and assumptions about black environmental disengagement. Hearing the stories of people of color helped provide a fuller picture of black environmental experience (Roche n.d.).

epistemological shift due to the lived experience of the antebellum south and forced agricultural labor affects how people of color interact with the natural world but does not negate black environmental engagement altogether.[40]

Since definitions of nature and environmental activism were framed by whiteness and white supremacy, the dominant forms of environmentalism was most concerned with preservation and conservation. This white racial frame neglects the experience of Native Americans and enslaved African and African American agricultural labor and leads to stereotypes and assumptions about who makes up the environmental activism roster. Racialized perceptions limit the scope of racially diverse participants who express concern for the outdoors (Finney 2014; Carter 2018). These ideologies lead to exclusionary processes, as Finney (citing DeLuca & Demo 2001) states: "A white wilderness is socially constructed and grounded in race, class, gender, and cultural ideologies" (2014, 3).[41] According to Carter (2018), this constitutes e*nvironmental othering,* or how communities of color are denied access to environmental benefits, resulting in an increased environmental burden.

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[40] Africans and Native Americans knew the importance of human and nonhuman interdependence; but this view differed dramatically from the vast majority of whites, especially white men, who viewed nature, and those closely associated with it, as something to be dominated and exploited for resources (Finney 2014). Between 1882 and 1968, nearly 4,742 black people were lynched in the woods and forests by white mobs legitimizing fear and the idea that certain places were bad for blacks to occupy. A historical overlay exists upon the natural landscape to the extent that black and white engagement with the said landscape will often be strikingly different.

[41] The racialization of the environment, representation in environmental activism, identity, and impacts on black lived experience shapes black environmental beliefs and activism. While black environmental engagement is often relegated to field-hand and cook status, they helped foster today's food system in unimaginable ways (Carter 2021; Twitty 2017) White environmentalists must struggle with the errancy of the white racial frame and its impact on how we view environmentalism and its participants.

Breaking free from white stereotypical and ideological frameworks to embrace the implications of *imago Dei*, the ways black people image God, can have profound impacts on black humanity and the earth. In this way, blacks are no longer environmental "others" but reclaim the stories of creativity and survival of forced enslavement as a way to communicate a historical agricultural and environmental legacy. Christopher Carter, Associate Professor of Theology, Ecology and Race, and a commissioned Elder in the United Methodist Church whose work centers on race and environmental justice writes, "If we reframe the stories of those who worked in the fields to privilege the history of African farmers, we discover that the African American connection to agriculture is not rooted in plantations, but in the highly regarded agricultural skills of the West African cultures of their ancestral past" (2018, 58). Carter continues, since "the opportunity to experience nature as leisure was dependent upon maintaining racist agricultural practices that exploited black and brown labor, nature as leisure can be exposed as a myth rooted in racist racial framing" (Carter 2018, 60). Consequently, white environmentalists are left to face how their ideologies surrounding humanness directly influenced historic events like chattel slavery, which "freed" many of them from agricultural labor and shaped their attitudes about human engagement with nature. Recognizing historical events, cultural and religious variations, and complexities helps explicate black environmental interaction. Through oral traditions and religious practices, environmental knowledge was transmitted alongside agricultural knowledge about growing crops like peanuts, okra, rice, watermelon, black-eyed peas, and eggplant. Enslaved peoples were selected for their agricultural knowledges, and as such, played a key role, say, in the planting of peas and rice in the Carolinas (Holloway 2020). Following how traditional African ecological

knowledge was transmuted on account of the African Diaspora uncovers sustainable practices for today and assist with developing a healthy relationship with nature for interdependence and caretaking (Hosen, Nakamura, and Hamzah. 2020). So, black religious and ecological experiences are not monolithic but are shaped by a transnational and continental exchange of cultural and religious epistemologies.

Dianne D. Glave expands on this work in her article "The Green Confessions of Nat Turner" (2016). Abolitionist Nat Turner may not readily be associated with black environmentalism, but she argues his name should be added to the list of folk who struggled for black environmental rights. Hiding in the woods after leading his famed slave rebellion at a Southampton County, Virginia plantation, Turner recounts eco-theological visions rooted [as it were] in black liberation theologies. His description of "The blood of Christ that had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners, [which] was now returning to earth again in the form of dew" links Christ's salvific work to weather phenomena – rain (Confessions 1831). In other eco-theological visions, he states, "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened--the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams" (Confessions 1831). These apocalyptic visions, which included natural elements - sun, sky, streams - and supernatural figures - white and black spirits, are akin to scenes of the book of Revelation where environmental undoing occurs.[42] In *Confessions*, Turner narrates his reliance upon the Spirit to reveal knowledge about nature, planets, tides, and seasons. Not only does he recount his experience as a runaway slave, remaining in the woods thirty days before returning to the plantation, but he also describes how the woods

[42] See Revelation chapters 6, 8, 9, 12:13-17, and 16.

were gathering places for feasting and secret meetings. Rooted in black liberation struggles, black environmental resistance seeks to transform harmful practices targeted at people of color.

As I mentioned earlier, *ecowomanist* scholars like Melanie L. Harris place womanist thought in conversation with the environmental justice movement, eco-feminism, and historically African American religious and environmental engagement to lift the role of black women as environmentalists. Harriett Tubman's in-depth knowledge of the lands and swamps was critical to her repeated success in helping enslaved peoples leave the South (Harris 2017a; 2017b). In conversation with womanist scholars like Karen Baker Fletcher (1998, 2006) and Delores S. Williams (1993/2013), scholars of ecology like Shamara Shantu Riley (2003), and scholars in African theology like Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001, 2013, 2019), Harris describes black woman's connection to the earth. In this way, she links social justice with environmental justice. Using Taylor's environmental justice paradigm, Harris extends the earlier analysis of how the intersections of race and class influence environmental health disparities to more explicitly consider the disproportionate impact on women of color and the poor. Centering on lived experiences and perspectives of black women, she contends that ecowomanism "argues that a counter-narrative of environmental history be constructed that takes into consideration the earth ethics (ethical systems regarding earth care) from communities of color and specifically women from those communities" (Harris 2016, 28). In this way, people of the African Diaspora may reclaim eco-narratives silenced by white environmental activism and scholarship.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have looked at the beginnings of the environmental justice movement - which may be traced as far back as the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike in 1968 - and the development of an environmental justice paradigm. The Warren County, North Carolina protest in 1982 was a turning point in the movement's history to the extent that the unfair environmental burden heaped on black and poor communities drew national attention and calls for remediation. The role of religion has been/is evidenced in environmentalism in national environmental leadership summits like the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., sponsored in part by the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, black church-led environmental activism like urban gardens and solar panel installation, national food security networks, partnerships with local grassroots organizations and federal agencies, and protests and activism against the placement of hazardous sites as witnessed in the Warren County protests. Thus, the role of religion and its institutions for environmental justice have helped frame the conversation as a justice and moral issue (Immergut and Kearns 2012; Moe-Lobeda 2013).

At all levels of engagement - congregational, denominational, and national - religiously grounded environmental engagement continues to occur. Putting the study of black Christian congregations and urban environmental justice in conversation helps advance both fields by describing predominately black churches addressing anti-environmental policies and practices. This work also builds on ecowomanist scholars like Dianne D. Glave (2010) and Melanie Harris (2016) to retell environmental engagement narratives that include people of color's perspectives. The examples of environmental activism in this project center predominantly on black churches in geographically

different urban areas across the U.S. to get at how communities of color continue to bear uneven environmental burdens and, thus, are responding to inequitable ecological treatment. Their efforts to secure quality food, lower energy usage and costs, foster sustainability, and advocate for clean air, water, and soil are an extension of historical black environmental engagement.

Having followed the social movements and issues that help frame their work, it is essential to understand their work's physical urban issues and contexts. Therefore, I now describe urban places' characteristics and their impacts on public health. A look at racial residential segregation, which has historically plagued U.S. metropolitan cities, will elucidate how local zoning and planning decisions, federal policies like the Housing Act of 1949, and redlining have impacted residential patterns and environmental and health outcomes today (Swope, Hernández, and Cushing 2022).

CHAPTER THREE

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

Historically, deleterious environmental hazards were sited in poor or ethnic communities since the first founding of major U.S. cities. Accordingly, black churches have been dealing with the deleterious health effects for a long time. As far back as the 1880s in growing industrial cities like Chicago and New York City, waste management practices signaled environmental nightmares for poorer urban areas. As alternatives to dumps and reduction plants, incinerators emerged in the early 1920s, although they still tended to be located in poorer and blacker neighborhoods. By the 1950s and 60s, a growing need to address solid waste led to sanitary landfills and incinerators as primary methods of waste management. Landfills, incineration, and recycling continued from the 70s to the present day, and the siting of these facilities impact both urban and rural communities of color. Kelly-Reif and Wing (2016) state, "Rural environmental injustice can be characterized as a parasitic relationship between urban and rural communities because urban populations obtain most of their food and energy from rural areas and return their wastes to rural areas" (1). Yet, rural environmental injustice is not solely a concomitant of urban-rural interactions since practically all environmental injustice is shaped by patterns of racism and/or inequality that lead to environmental injustices. Scholars like Ashwood and MacTavish (2016) and Cannon (2020) note the linkages between rural geographies, lower sociodemographic status, gender, and education to the siting of landfills and hazardous waste facilitates. This reflects the findings of the UCC Toxic Wastes and Race study that will be discussed later.

In addition to the placement of waste facilities, Unjust practices like illegally dumping hazardous waste and locating industrial uses adjacent to residential uses contribute to increased morbidity and mortality rates among blacks.[43] A fundamental element that has led to black urban environmental decline is racial residential segregation that has meant "the majority of blacks remained severely segregated from whites in major metropolitan areas" (Charles 2003, 167). A decade later, research still showed that racial residential segregation "continues actively to be produced and perpetuated within an important subset of metropolitan areas that together contain a disproportionate share of the nation's black and Hispanic residents" (Massey 2016, 3).[44] In this way, sociologist W.E.B. DuBois' *color line* concept takes on a new sense in urban settings across the country, where a physical and material separation exists that still delineates where one lives.[45] In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he popularized the term "color line" to unpack the ways race affects social conditions of African-Americans: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the

[43] Although mortality rates between blacks and whites have continued to decrease across the past three decades, African American mortality rates remain higher than their white and other ethnic counterparts. For more information see: Hill, Latoya, Nambi Ndugga, and Samantha Artiga. 2023. "Key Data on Health and Health Care by Race and Ethnicity." KFF. March 15, 2023. https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/report/key-data-on-health-and-health-care-by-race-and-ethnicity/.

[44] Darryl Fears, an environmental reporter for The Washington Post, writes that even today black people are "exposed to 38 percent more polluted air than White Americans, and they are 75 percent more likely to live in communities that border a plant or factory" (Fears and Dennis 2021). Increased exposure to air, water, and soil contamination means black people are four times as likely to die of pollution-related factors.

[45] The original use of the term "color line" is attributed to an article by Frederick Douglas, entitled, "The Color Line," published in The North American Review in 1881.

lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (vii). This problem is more than relational however, as it results in physical lines (i.e. highways, rail lines) of separation between races.

In this chapter, I describe urban environmental justice as a sub-theme of environmental justice - and how it is distinguished from traditional environmental justice studies and is a framework for understanding environmental justice issues within urban contexts. Race, space, and class intersect to produce uneven exposure to urban environmental degradation like failing infrastructure, lead, and air, soil, and water contamination is also narrated, as are concerted efforts to conflate categories of *white* and *black* to *clean* and *dirt*, respectively. A look at the maintenance of racial segregation is provided to underscore how institutionalized discrimination produces planning, zoning, and residential patterns that unfairly affect people and communities of color by unevenly locating toxic waste facilities in closer proximity to black and poor neighborhoods. These sustained patterns of segregation through institutionalized means also led to the creation of the black ghetto. I unpack some of the contours of race and space concerning residential segregation, citing notable legal decisions like the Buchanan v. Warley decision (45 U.S. 60 (1917), which declared racially biased zoning unconstitutional yet did little to remedy housing exclusion. I offer a look at inordinate trauma caused, in part, by urban renewal projects and their concomitant impacts on the material, spatial, and environmental health of black and brown communities. An exploration of ongoing increased urbanization and its potential impacts on black public health is provided, too. Now, I will begin with urban environmental justice as an approach to remedy systematic environmental degradation.

URBAN CHARACTERISTICS

Urban environmental justice is an evolving multi-dimensional phenomenon. Isabelle Anguelovski, professor of urban studies and planning, says that as an emerging sub-theme of environmental justice, urban environmental justice seeks to curtail "Urban processes such as deindustrialization, uneven development and white flight to the suburbs, inner-city disinvestment and devaluation, zoning ordinances, racist mortgage lending practices, and racist neighborhood covenants [that] have been associated with the low number of fresh and healthy supermarkets in poor and minority neighborhoods and the creation of food deserts" (2013, 4). Thus, an environmental justice agenda should include natural and built environments, cities, and the impacts of social stratification on public health. Urban environmental justice is a part of the broader environmental justice conversation that instantiates addressing social and material constructions for equitable and sustainable housing development, healthy food options, and job access. It advances community development by addressing social stratification and place-making.

Traditional environmental justice studies explored the disproportionate impacts of environmental injustice on vulnerable populations and communities of color. However, in urban areas, the impacts of environmentally unjust practices also include failing infrastructure and a lack of access to greenways, tree shade, and affordable housing, which were often overlooked (Pellow 2009). Anguelovski (2013) writes, "Traditionally, environmental justice (EJ) researchers have centered their attention on "brown" cases of injustice—that is, cases of air pollution, water contamination, toxic spills, among others—and on the fights of residents against disproportionate exposure to environmental toxins and other health risks" (1). Inaccessibility to fresh quality food, sustainable and affordable housing, and green spaces, profoundly impact physical and psychological

health, especially in light of growing urbanization. Wealthier and white non-Hispanic communities can access healthy environmental conditions with park access, nature trails, updated infrastructure, quality housing, and low noise and air pollution.[46]

As Landry and Chakraborty (2009) and Park and Pellow (2011) write, urban neighborhoods are less likely to have playgrounds, fitness centers, other physical activity facilities, and grocery stores. This context makes Trinity UCC's work, as elaborated below in ch even more exceptional since their sustainable community development includes the construction of a health center, healing garden, and farmers' market. Disproportionately, communities like the one where Trinity UCC is located receive unsatisfactory environmental services like street cleaning, waste and water management, and park services. Zimring (2016) describes how terms like *dirt* and *waste* "informs the construction of our social and cultural values" (1). What gets classified as waste, who is employed to handle it, as we saw in the Sanitation Workers' Strike, the stereotypes that surround those who handle it accompanied by poor wages and severe health threats, and the systems we have created to dispose of waste help to manufacture our social and cultural interaction and perception of waste. The evolution and proliferation of this thinking provided a rationale for the spatial organization of toxic waste facilities predominantly in communities of color.

[46] In response to environmental injustice, activists and grassroots organizers are addressing environmental degradation in low-income and marginalized communities. Domestically and abroad, community groups have cleared debris from neighborhood lots to plant urban farms and gardens; converted or demolished abandoned houses and properties to create community centers or green places; and worked to improve waste collection. From metropolises like Detroit to Los Angeles, residents are taking the initiative to address unjust environmental practices that have led to acute and chronic illnesses (Brulle and Pellow 2006; Anguelovski 2013).

Ongoing notions of blacks polluting white spaces reshaped the urban landscape, producing residential segregation in major U.S. cities. As urban areas were categorized for residential and industrial use, spatial segregation based on race intensified. Zimring points to "the Black Belt of Chicago [which] grew on the city's South and West Sides, away from the central business district" (2016, 147) to show racial concentration in urban centers. In Chapter 4, I will say more about how the influx of black southern migrants impacted urban northern cities and the response of some black churches. He also notes that since the end of the Civil War, almost all levels of government, policy-making, real estate, zoning, and planning conflated whiteness with cleanliness and black with dirt to the extent that racial residential segregation exists as an institutional marker. The social and spatial organization extends from the Jim Crow era to modern-day housing practices. Keeping white communities clean and black communities dirty by locating toxic waste facilities within their borders is a result of whiteness.

The underrepresentation of people of color in varying sectors of government, law, and business who might counter such systemic racism is in itself a result of institutional racism. Lack of representation in decision-making maintains whiteness and white well-being, as the quality of life for blacks, Hispanics, and other racial minority groups diminishes. Intersecting governmental, legal, and business practices influence environmental decision-making, resulting in unfair practices targeting poor and minority communities (Bullard, 1993). Scholars like Kushner (1980) and Massey and Denton (1993) describe how race, poverty, and housing intersect to segregate U.S. cities. Isolating black urban populations to particular areas without access to better-paying jobs, quality education, and resources for social uplift resulted in the creation of the black

ghetto, and this is the situation that many urban black churches seek to address. More often, whites live in neighborhoods lacking racial diversity, and black and brown folk, immigrants are restricted to areas replete with substandard housing and the economic means to escape it.[47]

The political economy that produces residential segregation and environmental hazards includes a sophisticated network of stakeholders that uphold environmentally racist practices. How solid waste and pollution get managed, especially in urban areas, reveals targeted attempts to render certain people expendable while securing the health and well-being of others. What Pellow calls "garbage wars" constitute the battle to keep waste out of urban, poor, and black communities. He offers an environmental justice frame that "emphasizes the importance of process and history, the roles of multiple stakeholders, the effects of social stratification by race and class, and the ability of those with the least access to resources to shape the struggle for environmental justice," (2004, vii). Per capita, predominantly black cities like Memphis, St. Louis, Houston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta have more landfills than other U.S. cities, increasing their residents' exposure to noise and air pollution (Bullard 1993; Pellow 2004). Spatially locating "solid waste facilities (garbage dumps, transfer stations, sewage treatment plants, incinerators) and other polluting industries (chemical plants, steel plants)" (2) in poorer communities amount to systematic environmental destruction aimed at black and poor folk (Pellow

[47] Where people live is connected to social mobility because of access to quality education, decreased environmental health hazards, and job opportunities. According to the Urban Institute, the gap between white and black homeownership increased from 28.1 percent in 2010 to 30.2 percent in 2017 (Choi et al. 2019). This gap, as a result of institutional racism is produced by zoning and planning restrictions, housing and development practices, banking and government policies, and results in residential homogeneity.

2004). This is especially observable in the case of an illegal shingle recycling operation in Dallas, Texas, which I explore in detail in Chapter 4.

RACIAL RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

According to Gunnar Myrdal (1944), Massey and Denton (1993), and Richard Rothstein (2017), racial residential segregation is the root cause of urban poverty and a feature in the maintenance of underclass communities in America. Racism evidenced along the lines of place and power results in the racialization of space (i.e., segregation).[48] George Lipsitz, professor in the Department of Black Studies, says racialization of space and spatialization of race get at how our lived experience contains both racial and spatial dimensions (2007). Too often, black residential patterns are seen as a by-product of economic consequences; however, no other race or ethnic group "in the history of the United States has ever experienced the sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years" (Massey and Denton 1993, 2). People of different races are concentrated in physical space through zoning and planning, infrastructure development, and housing and lending discrimination.

The concentration of people of different races in concentrated places is a product of racism and has led to the creation of what is often called "the black ghetto", which

[48] Where people live has historically been influenced by white spatial conceptions that perpetuate exclusivity and diminishes the chances of people of color from escaping material and ideological constructions around them. In cities across northern America, discriminatory actions in housing, living-wage employment, and inequitable environmental burden isolated different races to different spaces. People of color were excluded from accumulating assets that appreciate in value and privileges white counterparts' wealth accumulation through homeownership and property acquisition.

predominantly was also seen as a repository for waste (Bullard 2007; Zimring 2016).[49] What is characterized as the black ghetto is the manifestation of institutionalized discrimination where race, class, and space intersect to create social stratification. Logan, Zhang, Turner, and Shertzer (2015) note the development of the black ghetto dates as far back as 1880. The process of "ghettoization" and systematic segregation of blacks was concomitant with a lack of investment and access to amenities. However, "What distinguishes the ghetto is not its size or homogeneity but rather the process of race-based exclusion" that underscores how race influences housing patterns. As the population in cities increased across the U.S., so did black exclusion from whites and white spaces (Anderson 2023; Turner, Chingos, and Spievack 2021). African Americans are still steered towards non-white communities, although laws ban such real estate practices. Even when they have economically comparable status to their white counterparts, through race-based steering, black home buyers are frequently shown properties in less desirable neighborhoods (Peterson and Kris 2010; Hall, Timberlake, and Johns-Wolfe 2022).

Federal programs that supported infrastructure investment and mortgage subsidies spurred white flight from inner cities and strategically created barriers between white and black communities. Simultaneously, urban renewal programs and public housing projects targeted predominantly black areas such that by the end of the twentieth century, eighty percent of the black population lived in urban areas outside the south - as compared to

[49] To learn more about the term "ghetto" and its social and physical construction see Daniel B. Schwartz. (2019). "How America's Ugly History of Segregation Changed the Meaning of the Word 'Ghetto'." *TIME Magazine.* See also Robert Weaver. (1948). *The Negro Ghetto*; Kenneth B. Clark (1965). *Dark Ghetto*; and Arnold R. Hirsch (1983) *Making the Second Ghetto*.

eighty percent of America's black population who lived in the rural south at the end of the nineteenth century. people of color's assimilation into the American urban fabric However, was more challenging than other racial and ethnic groups migrating from other countries (Massey and Denton 1993). For rural blacks, cities became a trap - another mechanism of oppression and alienation.

In *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal (1944) wrote that segregation lay at the center of American racial oppression and resulted in social, political, educational, and economic inequality, even though, in 1917, the United States Supreme Court declared racially biased zoning unconstitutional. The Buchanan v. Warley decision (45 U.S. 60 (1917) prohibited racial segregation in property rights but did not affirm equal protection under the law. Following the Fair Housing Act of 1968, housing segregation was sidelined as attention turned toward employment and education. Inequities in housing persisted such that all black neighborhoods emerged not because of market forces but through institutional practices, personal behaviors, and public policies that sought to control black population growth and market prices that drove down property values. At the local, state, and federal levels, laws were imposed, forcing blacks into overpopulated neighborhoods. City ordinances prohibited them from buying homes in areas designated as "white," limiting access to better education, healthcare, and employment. Now, racial covenants are illegal, but they laid the groundwork for discriminatory practices in zoning and residential segregation (Thompson et al. 2021)

For Mindy Fullilove, a social psychiatrist whose work focuses on how social and environmental factors affect communities, environmental injustice is a part of America's segregation story because once restrictions based on race were ascribed to space and

place, lesser-valued races and the places they occupy were targeted as sites for environmental degradation, as is the case for residents - primarily black and Latino - in the Floral Farms section of south Dallas where Shingle Mountain was located. Through "redlining," racially homogenous neighborhoods took shape, with majority white communities spared environmental degradation.[50] Beryl Satter, professor of History, notes that as early as the 1930s, property appraisers had created a system of rating that designated areas as desirable and undesirable. White homogenous areas were designated "A," white ethnic groups (e.g., Jewish) were rated "B" or "C," and neighborhoods with black residents were labeled "D." Colors were associated with each: green, blue, yellow, and red respectively, hence the name redlining (Satter 2009).

The color-line that W.E.B. DuBois discussed in *The Souls of Black Folk* is not imaginary. Instead, it shows up in "zoning ordinances that prohibited black people from living on blocks where the majority of residents were white" (Schwartz 2019, para 5); it sustains discriminatory housing options, unfair bank lending practices, and unlawful government housing policies. Some municipalities exercise unjust land use control through zoning and planning, contributing to inequitable development. Discriminatory and exclusionary zoning and land use policies affect the distribution of resources between communities, with black and poor residents impacted more severely than whites. According to a National Fair Housing Alliance study, properties in underserved areas are marketed to white seekers as affordable investment opportunities. As Bullard offers,

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[50] For more on redlining and its impacts on racial residential segregation, resource allocation, and divestment see Daniel Aaronson, Daniel Hartley, and Bhashkar Mazumder. 2021. "The effects of the 1930s HOLC" redlining" maps." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 13.4: 355-92. See also, Gregory Squires, ed. (2011). *Redlining To Reinvestment*.

"While the physical signs of Jim Crow have come down, invisible walls still limit access to opportunity and maintain social inequality between black life and white life in the United States" (2007, 1). A report provided by the National Association of Realtors states, "Black Americans have the highest denial rates for purchase and refinance loans" to the extent that "20% of Black and 15% of Hispanic loan applicants were denied mortgages, compared with about 11% of White and 10% of Asian applicants" ("U.S. Homeownership up, But Black-White Gap Persists" 2023). There is a network of policies and facilitators who have a role in stifling black social mobility and wealth building through home ownership.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Color of Law* (2017), Richard Rothstein, a Distinguished Fellow of the Economic Policy Institute, points out that racially segregated housing is more than a production or vestige of American slavocracy; it is a federal government project designed to systematically consign blacks to designated neighborhoods using "racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs" (XII). Unconstitutional state-sanctioned housing practices helped secure African Americans' lack of access to homeownership and environmental amenities. Racial enclaves were/are created benefiting or restricting some more than others. In urban areas, unequal development limits access to affordable and quality housing, reliable public transportation, good schools, improved infrastructure, economic development, jobs, and health services. De facto segregated communities create and maintain an urban underclass.

Racial residential segregation is an underlying factor that contributes to the socio-spatial layout of U.S. cities and suburbs. The impacts of race and class on housing include environmental quality to the extent that Bullard avers, "For decades, African Americans and other communities of people of color have borne a disproportionate burden of pollution from incinerators, smelters, sewage treatment plants, chemical factories, and a host of other polluting facilities" (2007, 5). The impacts of racial residential segregation are seen in examples like the Floral Farms neighborhood in south Dallas, where some long-time residents, like Marsha Jackson, now suffer from chronic respiratory issues in light of illegal dumping.

DISPROPORTIONATE TRAUMA

As discussed previously, a white racial frame interprets interaction with nature through a lens of white middle- and upper-class experience in terms of recreation and spiritual enlightenment, or a place to prove masculinity. It constructs a dominant worldview that minimizes black and brown worldviews, interpretations, and narratives of experience with the environment. Racialized categories constructed by whites, which privilege and affirm their environmental belonging, also negate how environmental inequities appear in marginalized communities, affecting everyday perceptions of and belonging in nature (Hickcox 2018). According to Bullard (1993, 320), "While both class and race determine the distribution of environmental hazards, racial minorities are more likely to be exposed to environmental threats than are whites of the same social class," demonstrating that race is a more powerful predictor than class. African American children are two to three times more likely than white children to suffer from lead poisoning and acute and chronic breathing complications, such as asthma (Cassidy-

Bushrow et al. 2017; Yeter 2020). Minoritized populations are overrepresented in the populations of those exposed to environmental hazards. Studies also show that, on average, nationally, non-Hispanic white populations experience lower rates of air pollution exposure than other racial/ethnic groups. While exposure rates varied by pollutant, in all cases, marginalized communities were exposed nearly twice as much as non-Hispanic white populations (Liu et al. 2021, 12).

Improved sanitary conditions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant a shift in health concerns from infectious to chronic disease. Heart disease, stroke, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer are now the leading causes of death in the U.S. According to Sacoby Wilson, environmental health scientist, "Euclidean-based zoning and planning initiatives have been instrumental in separating unhealthy land uses from people, thus preserving the advancements made during the sanitary movement" (2008, 212). Nevertheless, unjust zoning and planning ordinances increased black and poor populations' exposure to industrial pollutants. The increased presence of health-restricting options like liquor stores and fast food restaurants, increased exposure to crime, and promotion of risky behavior through tobacco and alcohol ads in black and poor communities diminish the quality of life of most black and poor folk. These communities are under-resourced for much-needed services like supermarkets, parks, and recreational facilities.

In *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It,* Fullilove (2005) addresses the emotional pain of divestment and displacement. Not just individual loss but collective loss results when poor, black, and brown residents are forced to move from their neighborhoods and communities on

account of environmental pollution, urban renewal, increased housing costs, and gentrification. Urban renewal refers to city improvements; within a U.S. context, it has referred to the Housing Act of 1949 and subsequent modifications. It included provisions for slum clearance and national housing objectives like creating low-rent public housing and farm housing. While attempting to address a housing shortage in post-World War II through homeownership and public housing projects, aka "The Projects," the urban renewal era was more destructive than helpful.[51] Urban renewal projects aimed at redeveloping center cities have always had devastating impacts on primarily racialized groups such as black communal connectedness. In the wake of urban renewal, black neighborhoods were divested, black-owned businesses stalled, and the political power of the black vote was compromised as voters dispersed into other communities. Although projects like Lincoln Center in New York City proposed 4,400 housing units, they failed to accommodate the nearly 7,000 low-income units and 800 businesses demolished for the massive artistic and cultural development (Williams 2017; Lin 2020).

The traumatic impact of black residential removal has meant individual and collective emotional, financial, and social devastation. Lipsitz (2007) includes Fullilove's "root shock" concept to get at the traumatic impacts of urban renewal for black communities. The racial dynamic of space undermines black and brown folk's ability to

[51] Urban renewal imagined "Well-planned, integrated residential neighborhoods, the development and redevelopment of communities, and the production, at lower costs, of housing of sound standards of design, construction, livability, and size for adequate family life; (4) governmental assistance to eliminate substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas, to facilitate community development and redevelopment, and to provide adequate housing for urban and rural nonfarm families with incomes so low that they are not being decently housed in new or existing housing" as the USC 1441: Congressional declaration of national housing policy states (Housing Act of 1949, Section 2 and Title V).

purchase homes or accumulate generational wealth. *Whiteness* affords advantages to whites, and blackness, and the proximity to blackness, disadvantages black social mobility. Although it was a step toward dismantling unjust housing, the Faith Housing Act of 1968 “contained no cease and desist provisions, allowed for only minimal financial penalties, and placed the burden of investigation, exposure, and adjudication of the law on private citizens rather than the departments of Justice or Housing and Urban Development” (Lipsitz 2007, 16). As a result, connections to culture, language, foodways, and religion were fractured. This “root shock” destroys black well-being and becoming. Building on DuBois’ problem of the color line, discussed previously, Fullilove makes the case that displacement is the problem of the twenty-first century because “the experience of place is encoded in our muscles and our bones” (2005, 226). Forcible displacement dislodges humans from their sense of self, practices, and habits tied to a place. In the wake of urban renewal, U.S. cities' spatial and economic restructuring unevenly impacted African Americans' economic growth and widened the gap in white and black engagement.

All cities undergo physical reshaping and social rearrangement. Through natural events like fire, human activity, and war, cities like Rome and Paris took on new forms, affecting the social makeup. Historically, within the U.S. context, urban renewal policies, public housing, and infrastructure have adversely impacted the reshaping of cities like Detroit, Michigan, Newark, New Jersey, and New Haven, Connecticut. In predominately black urban areas across the U.S., another diaspora took place as African Americans were targeted and displaced. While Africans who were transported to the New World created for themselves new communities by class, religion, customs, traditions, and language -

blacks impacted by urban renewal have yet to fully reconnect. African American dispossession of land and property by urban renewal is evidenced in the construction of highways through predominately black neighborhoods, gentrification, densification, and economic restructuring (Fullilove 2005). White disavowment of participating in the challenges produced by urban poverty and the limiting black social mobility is upheld by racial discrimination that is manifested spatially. Marginalized communities remain out of the sight of the majority of white Americans and reinscribe notions of black responsibility for their social stagnation as opposed to structural violence.

Trauma discourse within the scope of urban environmental justice invites attention to the ways race, space, and the environment dovetail, resulting in the preservation of predominately white communities and the expendability of black folk's neighborhoods. Increased literature on the physical impacts of anti-black environmental exposure has led to widened attention to how race, place, and environmental racism intersect, negatively affecting health and well-being (Braithwaite 1992; Morello-Frosch and Lopez 2006; Corburn 2009; Hutson and Wilson 2011; Benjamins and De Maio 2021). Yet, Edelstein (2018, 2019), Evans (2003), and Fullilove (2005) seek to describe the mental impacts of urban environmental injustice. The complex makeup of nature, land use regulations, racial, ethnic, economic, and social hierarchies, and the extent of the built environment constitute multi-dimensional trauma inflicted upon black and other minoritized communities. The availability and scarcity of land heighten conflict over exchange value and use value. While traditional environmental justice talk has focused on environmental burdens, within the context of urban areas, environmental quality rises to the top as people of color and low-income communities experience higher incidences

of environmental diseases like cancer, respiratory illness, and heart disease than their white counterparts (Environmental Protection Agency 2021; Swope, Hernandez, and Cushing 2022). The rate and type of health issues in urban areas in the U.S. draw attention to morbidity and mortality of poor and black and brown urban dwellers.[52] The situation globally is no better. Structural dimensions that drive environmental inequities in the U.S. appear in other countries, radically shaping the human experience with the environment.[53]

Urbanization, environmental injustice, and social stratification commingle to produce uneven exposure to environmental distress, which affects the health of low-income communities and people of color at higher rates than their white counter parts (Agyeman 2013; Brenner 2019). There are racial, economic, and spatial dimensions to urban environmental injustice, which cause compromised public health. These aspects create disproportionate proximal health-related diseases like cancer, asthma, and heart disease (Wilson, Hutson, and Mujahid 2008; Hutson and Wilson 2011). Acute and chronic illnesses due to environmentally unhealthy conditions are a global phenomenon. However, there are disproportionate impacts on the poor and communities of color

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[52] For more on urban environmental quality and human health see: Julie Sze. (2007). *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice.* See also William M. Bowen, et al. (1995) Toward Environmental Justice: Spatial Equity in Ohio and Cleveland, Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 85:4, 641-663, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.1995.tb01818.x; Wendy Collins Perdue, et al. (2003). "The built environment and its relationship to the public's health: the legal framework." *American Journal of Public Health* 93.9: 1390-1394.

[53] In the global South, poor and marginalized communities are targeted more frequently as sites of resource extraction, and mining in the African continent of gold, uranium, oil and other commodities has resulted in the ecological breakdown and environmental devastation (Anguelovski 2013).

around the world. In all, environmental injustice takes shape materially, biologically, cognitively, and physiologically due to racist ideologies that have helped construct and maintain structural evils like those outlined above. Since our environmental welfare is, or should be, a moral dilemma, religions and related institutions may be a source for correcting our curious environmental neglect. Within the US, predominately black congregations are boldly addressing the structural evils at the root of localized urban environmental degradation.

INCREASED URBANIZATION ON PUBLIC HEALTH

The people most affected by increased urbanization and unequal environmental protection should have a role in reclaiming their environmental agency. Self-determination includes reclaiming the environment around us, especially if the physical environment is the impetus for compromised health and wellness. Predominately black churches like Trinity United Church of Christ, Friendship-West Baptist Church, Pleasant Hope Baptist Church - and many others - are actively responding to environmental impacts on the public health of their communities by advocating for environmentally sustainable practices, removing deleterious hazards near residential homes, and creating alternative food systems. Although each church is situated in a distinct geographical context, their responsiveness to social and urban ills sheds light on the potential role of black churches in an increasingly urbanized world.

As discussed earlier, historically, increased population, urbanization, and casual sanitary regulations resulted in free-roaming animals, garbage-lined streets, vermin, and disease. Overcrowding in U.S. cities quickly led to sanitation, land use, food distribution, and housing reforms. As early as 1658, city streets were paved with cobblestone,

sanitation programs enacted, and speed limits enforced (Taylor 2009). Population growth impacted environmental conditions and reshaped social dynamics in major cities like New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore (Macionis 2016). Rapid outgrowth in cities transformed the built environment and spurred income inequality as wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few. By the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy and middle-class persons lived outside of the city, and the poor concentrated within it (Taylor 2009).[54]

Explicating the complex nature of urban places sheds light on physical and social characteristics of modern cities, megacities, and metropolises.[55] It also uncovers how rapid growth resulted in environmental inequalities. The realities of ongoing global urbanization led to conversations about *smart growth* and *urban sustainability* (Levy 2017; Kahn 2006; Mutnick et al. 2022). According to Jonathan Barnett, emeritus professor of city and regional planning, the smart growth paradigm encourages conservation and preservation of natural resources, mixed-use development, and

[54] In 1694 there were five thousand people in New York City; by 1776, there were twenty-five thousand residents; within fifteen years, meaning by 1790 the population had doubled to 50,000. By 1793, Philadelphia had a population of fifty thousand (Taylor 2009). Ensuring public health and safety meant enforcing restrictions in housing construction, marketplaces, relief for the poor, sewage systems, and land use regulations that separated residential from commercial uses.

[55] Urbanization is a primary predictor of land use and land alterations. Migratory shifts from rural areas to urban spaces can shift ecosystems dramatically (Eigenbrod et al. 2011; Elmqvist et al. 2013a; 2013b). Felix Eigenbrod, professor of applied spatial ecology at the University of Southampton, states that "high-density housing (dense urban) development leads to a greater reduction in subsurface water storage than low-density (suburban) housing, and to increases in river routing speed" (2011, 3205) to describe the nuanced impacts of urbanization on humans, the environment and agricultural production. In thirty-years (1970-2000), North America experienced an expansion of urban land at a rate of 3.31%. Now, 80% of the North American population is urban (Schewenius, McPhearson, and Elmqvist 2014, 435).

residential neighborhoods that are walkable as an alternative to urban sprawl (2018). Urban sustainability, as an extension of sustainable development, focuses on minimizing resource extraction by maximizing efficient resource use and advocating for equity - in a way that secures long-term environmental health (Huang 2015; Hamilton, Mitchell, and Yli-Karjanmaa 2002; Zhao 2011).[56]

A little over a century ago, globally, only 20% of people lived in urban areas compared to 50% of the global population that resides in urban centers today (Neiderud 2015). Now, the United Nations projects that nearly 70% of the world's population will live in urban centers by 2050. Urban population growth is expected to occur worldwide, but it is not evenly distributed: "Most of the world's population growth in this period is expected in urban areas in less wealthy regions of the world…with the most rapid pace of growth expected to occur in Asia and Africa…Urban growth is expected to occur more slowly in megacities and faster in midsized cities" (Vlahov et al. 2007, i17). This is relevant to my project because it underscores how urbanization threatens to compound existing social and environmental inequities everywhere, and how the problems described in this dissertation will continue to need to be addressed, hopefully in part by religious

[56] To learn more about increased urbanization due to population growth, migration, and trends in urban sustainable development see: *United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, 16 May 2018, https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html; and Huang, Lu, Jianguo Wu, and Lijiao Yan. "Defining and measuring urban sustainability: a review of indicators." *Landscape Ecology* 30 (2015): 1175-1193.

institutions. It emphasizes how social and environmental injustices are not just American phenomena but global structural occurrences.[57]

Some scholars project growth will happen unevenly in the economically and politically distressed areas of existing cities - especially in the global South (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2012). Since spatial growth means increased urban slums, an analysis of unhealthy conditions within the slums exposes the threats of unsafe drinking water, compromised sanitation and drainage, lax garbage collection, and air and noise pollution (Vlahov et al. 2007). City expansion will deleteriously affect the environment and human health because urban phenomena expand spatially, physically, and socially - concentrating poverty and social and health inequities. Cities that already contain concentrated disadvantage and limited social mobility will become home to more inequity.

Increased urbanization directly affects humans and nonhumans. Studying the impacts of cities on neural function/mental health elucidates how humans are adjusting to their relatively new physical and social environments. In "Brains in the City: Neurobiological effects of urbanization," Kelly G. Lambert, professor of behavioral neuroscience at the University of Richmond, describes how the physical and social landscapes of the city impact the brain because "urban environments represent a divergence from the ancestral habitats of both humans and nonhuman animals" (2015, 2). The city as a new habitat that is now home to most of the world's population disrupts the long-evolved relationship between humans and nature and can spur urban health-related

[57] Christian social ethicist, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (2013), identifies social structures as the micro, macro, institutional, and ideological systems that exist which shape human interaction, power and privilege.

issues especially compromised mental health. There is a correlation between living in urban environments and higher rates of psychiatric disorders and diminished emotional resilience (Lambert et al. 2015; Peen et al. 2010). Understanding the environment in which the brain operates helps us see how "environmental modifications have undoubtedly impacted the neural systems of animals inhabiting evolutionarily unfamiliar terrains" (Lambert et al. 2015, 3). Humans with decreased exposure to natural environments exhibit a diminished capacity to recover from stress (Lambert et al. 2015).

In contrast, persons with extended exposure to nature have been shown to have increased prefrontal cortex activity (Ulrich et al. 1991).[58] In essence, our physical environments shape mood and adaptive behaviors. Increased or extended exposure to violence, traumatic events, and post-traumatic stress disorder due to higher concentrations of poverty, substance abuse, and environmental hazards can have long-lasting impacts on the neurological and physiological self. Exposure to urban environmental traumas like living in close proximity to waste facilities, soil, air, and water contamination results in diminished neurological and physiological health. Increased population density, air and noise pollution related to heightened vehicular traffic and construction, unaffordable and inadequate housing, abandoned and dilapidated housing, failing infrastructure, and other environmental risks lead to greater potential for internalized trauma that "drive up blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen intake — preparing the body for fight or flight" (Bessel 2014, 42). The built environment and

[58] For more information on the role of the prefrontal cortex see: Euston DR, Gruber AJ, McNaughton BL. The role of medial prefrontal cortex in memory and decision making. Neuron. 2012 Dec 20;76(6):1057-70. doi: 10.1016/j.neuron.2012.12.002.

pathways to environmental health exposures may be as close to you as the house you live in, the air you breathe, the soil your food is grown in, and the food itself. Through absorption, ingestion, and inhalation, toxins enter the body. Thus, Wilson, Hutson, and Mujahid (2008) avers, “The time is now to challenge communities and cities across the country beset by fragmentation, environmental injustice, and health disparities to use zoning, planning, and community development to preserve urban landscapes, limit the distribution of pathogenic industries, and improve built environment conditions for urban populations” (2008, 214). Improving the social and environmental health conditions of low-income communities and black communities – which are not mutually exclusive – relies, in part, on just planning and zoning decisions within urban contexts.

CONCLUSION

This review of the complex dynamics of urban spaces, and the experiences of multiple burdens placed on black and minority communities demonstrates why the scope of the environmental movement needed to include proposed landfills and waste facilities, polluting facilities that poison water and air, unjust housing patterns, decaying infrastructure such as lead pipes, food insecurity, lack of environmental amenities like parks and greenways, and compromised sanitation in poor and communities of color. Because these issues had not been at the forefront of the environmental movement, the environmental justice movement and paradigm seek to remedy environmental injustices caused by structural evils like institutional racism by advocating for just environmental practices and policies. An environmental justice frame not only brings to light the inequities communities of color face in light of structural evil but also defines what equitable environmental treatment looks like.

A predominantly white environmental movement that interprets nature through a white racial frame means the movement "has historically portrayed nature as something to be enjoyed at one's leisure and thus it is *primarily* for the purposes of leisure that we must protect the environment" (Carter 2018, 47), rather than addressing the health and quality of life issues faced by those in urban areas. Additionally, stories of white male exploration, conquest, superiority, hard work, settlement, and resettlement re-inscribe myths about human dominance over nature. However, chattel slavery and its long reach as an ecological burden give black folk a different perspective of the environment. To expand perspectives of environmentalism and environmentalists, marginalized folks' experience of nature, in all contexts, must be heard. In this way, a fuller account of human experience with nature that includes black environmental practices will decenter white environmentalism as the standard of engagement.

Including urban black environmental history under the umbrella of environmental engagement helps expand traditional concepts of preservation and conservation to include remediation, and gets at the emotional legacy tied to nature (or the very different experiences in urban settings), in its many forms, for black folk. Though there are positive relationships to land experienced by many African Americans, the experience of some blacks with the land is distinctive insofar as it was associated with forced labor and violence. What has replaced forced agricultural labor, lynchings in the woods, and river drownings is deliberately situating carcinogenic incinerators and landfills in closer proximity to black communities than their white counterparts.

As urban environmental injustices expand on account of urbanization, primarily black churches in urban centers will be on the frontlines, contending for the health of

people of color who make up their congregations. How the urban phenomena and cities could positively influence human relationships and human-nature interaction has yet to be prioritized. Furthermore, how urban environmental injustice, caused by social, spatial, and planning and zoning arrangements impact people of color, warrants treatment to understand social and material constructions of cities. Ongoing impacts of racial residential segregation at local, state, and federal levels have led to divestment of particular neighborhoods and concentrated poverty. As far back as the Housing Act of 1949, communities of color have been targeted for clearance or urban renewal.

Even more, the underrepresentation of people of color in government, law, and environmentalism has resulted in a struggle to address basic community needs, including paved streets, improved sidewalks, street signs, lights, and updated water and sewer systems. Institutional barriers in housing and unfair planning and zoning restrict them from wealth accumulation through home and property ownership. Reclaiming zoning and planning as tools for just community development and equitable resource allocation will increase public health. Through zoning and planning urban landscapes can be preserved as livable spaces by "Limit[ing] the distribution of pathogenic industries, and improve built environment conditions for urban populations" (Wilson, Hutson, and Mujahid 2008, 214). The lack of zoning protection and the slow undoing of environmental protection policy has affected black and poor communities in ways other communities have not been impacted.

Even after the UCC report (1987) made environmental injustice abundantly clear, little changed: a 2007 follow-up report found that people of color were still the majority of those living within proximity of waste facilities. Most policymakers and advocates

have not recognized *just* housing practices as a critical part of the environmental justice conversation. But, recent human-made and natural events have increased attention on the interconnectedness of housing and environmental justice work. Lead poisoning and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and many other cities, the devastating impacts of hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Harvey, increased wildfires in the western region of the U.S., extended droughts, climate change, and uneven access to trees have all brought to light how housing inequities intersect with the environment. Where people live matters.

I now turn my attention to some urban black church environmental activism that is seeking to undo historical anti-black environmental decisions and practices. These churches provide a peek into how some black congregations approach urban environmental injustice to alleviate and promote healthy food options, community sustainability, and clean air, soil, and water in their contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE GROUND: CONTEXT-SPECIFIC ACTIVISM

INTRODUCTION

In an online article, Edward Blum, professor of history, said "On-the-ground studies will demonstrate that in the hearts and minds of many African Americans, the church still moves and inspires their lives" (2010). Indeed, this quote is accurate for the predominantly black churches and their pastors described in this chapter. My project expands the study of the role of black churches in addressing environmental injustice impacting African American communities by describing environmental activism at three mostly black churches: Trinity United Church of Christ (Chicago, Illinois), Pleasant Hope Baptist Church (Baltimore, Maryland), and Friendship-West Baptist Church (Dallas, TX). These are examples of black churches and their leaders on the national stage as prophetic voices in social and environmental justice. I offer that the work of these churches is essential to understanding the potential role of urban black churches in addressing environmental inequities. The examples of urban environmental activism described in this dissertation highlight the creative ways some black churches are responding to anti-black urban environmental decisions.

Environmental issues --such as those detailed in the previous chapter-- polluted air, water, and soil, food insecurity, and unsustainable practices, unevenly impact communities of color (Mascarenhas 2021; Brehm and Pellow 2022). My decision to include geographically distinct black churches gets at how environmental inequities are not isolated events or geographically determined but affect a range of black communities at unnecessarily higher rates than their white counterparts (again, as covered in the

previous chapter). Describing black churches in three different urban regions of the U.S. provides a window into black church responses to various environmental injustices across the nation. Black-led and black-church-led environmental activism has helped lift African American environmental history and engagement. Black environmental narratives are redefining environmental activism and dislodging ideological assumptions that only whites are concerned with the environment. Hearing stories of people directly addressing anti-black environmentalism can provide deeper insights into how people understand, make sense of, and respond to those experiences. This dissertation explores why the work of Trinity United Church of Christ, Friendship-West Baptist Church, and Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, alongside other local religiously affiliated environmental organizations that advocate for just ecological practices in their communities, is so needed.

TRINITY UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The history of Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, IL helps to understand what a trendsetter it is and to explain why it has tackled many aspects of urban environmental justice. The predominantly African American church was founded in 1961 with twelve members in the Washington Heights section of the South Side of Chicago, which was settled in the late 1880s.[59] The south corridor of the South Side of Chicago

[59] Washington Heights is bounded by 89th Street and 107th Street in community area 73, with a total population of over 25,000 residents, with black non-Hispanics making up 95% and white and Hispanic below two percent of the population. 14% have a bachelor's degree, and 27% earn an annual income of less than $25,000, compared to 22% for the City of Chicago. 59% of the housing stock was built between 1940 and 1969, which means there is an abundance of outdated, non-energy-efficient housing options in this section of the City. To learn more about Census Tract 7301 which comprises Trinity UCC, see: U.S. Census Bureau (2021). American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Retrieved from Census Reporter Profile page for Census Tract 7301, Cook, IL <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/14000US17031730100-census-tract-7301-cook-il/>

offered single-family homeownership opportunity to middle-class blacks. Former pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr. explains that the idea at the time was, "that a congregation for the middle-class, home-owning Blacks would meet a need for the intelligent, college-trained and professional Negroes who could afford to live on the far Southside of Chicago" (2010, 8). Today, it has over 10,000 members and is the largest church in the United Church of Christ, a mostly white mainline Protestant Christian denomination. Trinity's motto, "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian,"[60] was coined by its second pastor, Reverend Reuben A. Shears II, and was intended to counter growing claims that "Christian" and "Black" are opposed. Under the leadership of Reverend Kenneth B. Smith (1961-1966), Reverend Willie J. Jamerson (1966-1971), and Rev. Reuben A. Sheares II (1971-1972), Trinity UCC struggled to find its footing as a middle-class black church in a white mainline denomination that sought cultural assimilation amid a national social context of racial conflict. The historical and social context of Trinity UCC defined its role as an alternative to black nationalist groups like the Nation of Islam, headquartered in Chicago. Speller argues that Trinity UCC was an intentional effort to counter the growing influence of Islam (2005).[61]

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[60] Speller (2005) and Marty (2008) explain the phrase to mean recovering the black theological self and agency. For more see: Grant, Carl A., and Shelby J. Grant. (2013). *The Moment: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and the Firestorm at Trinity United Church of Christ*.

[61] During the 1930s Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam moved his headquarters from Detroit to Chicago rallying blacks to separate from whites for social and economic independence. As early as the 1940s, thousands of blacks had converted from Christianity to Islam. For more see: C. Eric Lincoln. (1994). *The Black Muslims of America*.

Building on the church's commitment to maintain black cultural expression and ministries that addressed the needs of people of color, Rev. Wright's arrival in 1971- on the heels of the new motto and mission statement - coincided with the Black Consciousness Revolution and shifted the church's focus from securing a middle-class church to "(t)he concept of church as a place to enhance and validate their social position to one that appreciated the church as a place for spiritual formation" (Speller 2005, 83). This spiritual formation included black theology and liberative themes. Under Wright's leadership, Trinity's aim to reach all back folk - including the poor - materialized through preaching and social activism. Black cultural expression in worship services and ministries focusing on issues in their neighborhood, including environmental justice, gained local and national attention. For Bernard W. Bell (2009), professor of American and African American literature, the ministry/services Trinity United Church of Christ provided suggest Wright's beliefs and values were "consistent with the tradition and perspective of many urban black American Baptist and Methodist churches" (Bell 2009, 334). During Wright's tenure, a justice ministry that was internally based and externally focused on addressing the needs of the surrounding community was established. Under his 37 years of leadership, the church grew to hundreds, then thousands due to a combination of efforts which included dynamic preaching, incorporating gospel music in the worship experience, an emphasis on youth ministry, pastoral care, and socially relevant ministry programs for Drug & Alcohol Recovery, Health, and Domestic Violence Advocacy/Care, and HIV/AIDS (Bell 2009; Grant & Grant 2013).

Rev. Wright handpicked Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III to succeed him in 2008. Rev. Wright and Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. were classmates at United Theological Seminary.

Rev. Wright met Rev. Moss III when he was a teenager and had since heard about his dynamic preaching and ministry. Like his father, Rev. Otis Moss Jr., the influential pastor of the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio who knew MLK and several presidents, Moss III's black liberation theological perspective suited Rev. Wright and the congregation's endeavor to affirm black folks' humanity in light of systematic oppression. After extensive talks and implementation of a strategic succession plan, Rev. Moss III arrived at Trinity UCC after serving Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia. The decision for Rev. Moss III to succeed Rev. Wright was challenging as it had been assumed he would succeed his father at Olivet in Cleveland. Since his arrival, he has expanded the justice ministry's reach to include environmental justice.

Trinity's Environmental Justice Response(s)

In my virtual interview with Rev. Moss III on November 10, 2022, he stated that although black communities face many urban environmental injustices "[He] would begin with the issue of food access and food justice - communities that occupy a food desert or food swamp. On top of that is environmental dumping that happens in our communities," which impacts air, water, and soil toxicity, and compromises public health. Food accessibility is but one environmental challenge faced by blacks as many of the urban environmental issues go unheard of due to a lack of political and economic power - especially in light of major corporations with an unlimited supply of resources. Rev. Moss III pointed out how years-long fights with industrial and chemical companies who polluted predominately black neighborhoods have drowned out the voices of black folk (Altgeld Gardens, mentioned in Chapter 1, is less than 10 miles away).

Moss's explanation of socio-environmental issues that plague marginalized communities demonstrates the thoroughness of his understanding of and need for urban environmental justice. Going beyond the classic discussion of urban environmental issues, he advocates tree resilience, describing it as the "the replacing of native trees with trees from different regions that then create other issues in our community and region" (Moss 2022). He argued that nonnative trees are brought into black communities bringing new types of insects. Hence, one of the church's environmental programs addresses tree resilience and the importance of native trees to a community. The church coordinates a team that goes "from home to home doing checks on the trees and offering native trees to be planted in their community that will be much more resilient over time" says Rev. Moss III. Trees and their survival are important to urban areas because trees conserve water, reduce soil erosion, lower temperature through shade, and lower concentrations of particulate matter (The Nature Conservancy 2017; Pataki et al. 2021). As a concept, tree resilience may be akin to forest resilience which is a measure of adaptability to continue to grow despite the habitat changes and disturbances (i.e. fires, insect attacks).[62]

When I asked what prompted the church's involvement in environmental activism, he named his wife, Monica, as one of his primary motivations. "My wife, she's a food justice advocate," he said referring to her role as leader of the Greater Chicago Food Depository's board of directors. Trinity's concern about the role of healthy and fresh food in creating better communities has led the church to create urban gardens and a

[62] For more on forest resilience see Kim Ingram "Promoting Forest Resilience with Fewer Trees." 2022 ANR Blogs. iohttps://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=55236.

farmers market.[63] But, these efforts are a cog in the wheel of a much more comprehensive understanding of community resilience. Again, in our interview, Rev. Moss III demonstrated his complex understanding of black environmentalism, noting that historically, black people had a deep connection to the land that extended beyond growing food and included the design of communities. The location of recreation, parks, and gardens are all connected to environmental justice. Expanding on black folks' environmental past, the church's urban environmental work includes redesigning the existing infrastructure, and developing adequate and affordable housing. He continued by explaining,

> If you design it [community] a certain way, in connection with nature, with creation, you can mitigate flooding - which traditionally happens in black communities, especially communities that are struggling economically. So [if] you want to increase housing [value], reimagine how you do design, ensure that you have access to food, but just not corporate access. If you have access to food that has grown in the neighborhood, along with farmers, then bring in a company that is sensitive to all those aspects, you have a winning strategy of reimagining what that community can look like and how that community can thrive versus survive.

This description of a planned community that carefully considers how the design, access to nature, food security, and partnerships with socially conscious businesses work together to create a liveable community is the blueprint of their Imani Village, described below. For Rev. Moss III and the church, addressing environmental injustice means having a broad lens of how food, trees, industrialization, housing and infrastructure, and

[63] According to Rev. Moss III, historically black communities in and surrounding Chicago, like Pembroke, a rural town located an hour south of Trinity, which has a history of African American farming, now find it challenging to get the food they produce into stores across Illinois.

nature-based community design connect to perpetuate or dismantle anti-black environmental and planning decisions.

Through sermons like "When the Brook Dries Up," Moss raises awareness about environmental themes like climate change, tree resilience, and human impact on ecosystems and natural resources by policies and practices. This sermon is drawn from 1 Kings 16: 30 - 31 and 17: 1 - 9, which elucidates the Prophet Elijah's declaration of drought in response to King Ahab's ungodly actions, which included marrying Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians.[64] During his sermon, Rev. Moss III, took pastoral and preaching license in summarizing the pericope in his own words stating, "Because of your policies [speaking to King Ahab] there will be an ecological reaction. The brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land." Here, he ties policy to environmental degradation and underscores the severe consequences of climate change which is a contributor to drought.[65] Rev. Moss III reads the text through environmental lenses, so to speak, helping him frame the sermon as a call to just environmental policy making and eco-awareness:

> There are really only two reasons brooks dry up: one is man-made and the other cosmic. Man-made dams keep all of the resources upstream but you don't care about anybody downstream. So, you end up with a brook [that's] dried up downstream, but all of the resources for the 1% are upstream. Sometimes, somebody will institute a policy that will dry up the brook for somebody

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[64] The Jezebel reference here, points to the use of the term as a trope used against black women in ministry, as explained earlier in this dissertation.

[65] The U.S. Geological Survey of the U.S. Department of the Interior website states, "Climate change has further altered the natural pattern of droughts, making them more frequent, longer, and more severe. Since 2000, the western United States is experiencing some of the driest conditions on record. The southwestern U.S., in particular, is going through an unprecedented period of extreme drought. This will have lasting impacts on the environment and those who rely on it" ("Droughts and Climate Change" 2022).

> downstream [while] there's water upstream. There has to be some dam breakers in the [church] to ensure that the 99% will receive [water]…We need some dam breakers in the church. (guest sermon, Alfred Street Baptist Church 2013)

Here, he speaks to how uneven distribution of environmental resources harms low-income and communities experiencing poverty. "Man-made dams" symbolize people in power, and institutions that systematically deny needful environmental benefits or direct environmental hazards to particular communities. Rev. Moss III's sermon becomes a tool to inform and drive his hearers to action. At times, the sermon recalls Jeremiadic preaching that critiques society and ignites environmental engagement among congregations as I described earlier in Chapter 1.

Trinity UCC's "emphasis on environmental concerns is not secondary in its ministry" says Celeste Kennel-Shank (2017, para. 3), a journalist whose work centers religion, race, and urban life — "it flows from a green theology that shapes everything the congregation does" (para. 3). To this end, Imani Village, a mixed-use community development project, responds to local divestment and strives for self-determination. The development includes a health clinic, quality, affordable housing for seniors and low-income families, an athletic facility, a job training center, and a five-acre urban farm. Partnering with the Advocate Medical Group, Imani Village provides primary care to residents in an area whose healthcare facility - Rosalind Community Hospital - is threatened by severe budgetary cuts. For Patricia Eggleston, executive director of the Trinity 95th and Cottage Grove Planned Community Development, LLC - an offshoot of Trinity's development corporation, the rampant issues in their community signaled diminished social determinacy, prompting the church to act (Wasney 2018). This is why Imani Village proposes the use of 27 acres for community development projects that includes sustainable affordable housing, the George Washington Carver community

garden and black farmers market, recycling church bulletins, roof garden, hosting Earth Day activities, and educating members on ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

Another prominent aspect of their work, indeed, noteworthy in that it is visible to everyone, was the decision to renovate the church with "green design" in mind which would enhance the aesthetic of the church building and reduce its energy-related expenses. The renovation included a roof covered in vegetation and solar panels.[66] Rev. Moss III, stated the renovation was premised on three ideas - one, it must economically empower blacks in the community; two, it must utilize people from mass incarceration systems; and three, it must be green design. He explained, "Since we are in an area that floods often, our renovation would benefit the houses around us. Because we're a large landowner…people who don't even go to the church are going to benefit from it and the housing prices go up in the process." Therefore, the vision of improvement he espoused includes benefits for church members and non-church residents.

What helped spur the church's environmental activism were small-group educational sessions led by Moss and church leaders, a community development corporation called Endeleo Institute, partnerships with academic institutions like the Illinois Institute of Technology, and working with local organizations like Faith in Place.

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[66] According to the US Department of Energy, solar energy has an important role in reducing air pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and mercury; and greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide. A recent study led by the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia confirmed that green roofs and solar power - also known as biosolar roofs - provides notable improvements in panel efficiency and energy production since the green helps to reduce the roof surface temperature (Carroll 2023). For more information see: US Department of Energy (https://www.energy.gov/clean-energy); and Fleck, R., R. Gill, T. J. Pettit, F. R. Torpy, and P. J. Irga. "Bio-solar green roofs increase solar energy output: The sunny side of integrating sustainable technologies." *Building and Environment* 226 (2022): 109703.

Veronica Kyle, former Illinois statewide outreach director for Faith in Place, and co-founder of the Ecowomanist Institute, said in an interview that working with Trinity UCC was easy because there was an existing social justice ethos and consciousness around environmentalism - food, food justice, healthy eating - that allowed them to complete community gardening projects and energy audits that Faith in Place facilitated.[67] Speaking about the role of Trinity UCC she says the congregation took ownership of the projects to the extent that congregants continued the work when Faith and Place's role ended.

During my virtual interview with Veronica Kyle on October 4, 2022, she named aspects of urban environmental injustice that she believes need to be moved from the margins of environmental conversations. For her, the systematic undervaluing of black residential properties is critical to environmental injustice. Comparing housing prices in primarily black sections of Chicago like South Shore versus Hyde Park, which is predominately white, she says the disparity in housing prices is glaring although more South Shore homes abut Lake Michigan than those in Hyde Park, making them prime real estate. In my interview with Veronica Kyle on October 4, 2022, she offered, "Not only is there often a lack of affordable housing, there's an abundance of undervalued housing stock and ownership in EJ communities. If I pick my house up, and I were to go, maybe 15 blocks away, it would probably triple if not quadruple in value." She believes this is because of a systematic attempt to undervalue black property. So, expanding the

[67] The existing social justice ethos at Trinity UCC can be attributed to Rev. Dr. Wright's 37-year pastoral tenure as he emphasized justice ministry to address community needs as I explained earlier. Rev. Dr. Moss III expands this vision to include the environment.

definition of environmental justice to include a lack of affordable housing and undervalued housing in black communities is necessary.

From her perspective and experience growing up and living in the Southside of Chicago, she says air quality remains a predominant issue affecting urban black communities. Consequently, there are increased respiratory challenges and asthma among black residents - especially children. Recalling her childhood environmental exposure, she says, “I grew up in Altgeld Gardens, which to this day is considered the toxic donut. Surrounded by the steel mills…. you used to recognize where I live because of the way it smelled as you were getting to that area. As a little girl, I would see mounds of fire shooting off the hill, and I didn't know those were landfills. We had incinerators at the end of every row of housing.” This kind of residential pattern which unevenly situated residents of Altgeld in greater proximity to incinerators and toxic environmental exposure hearkens to the patterns of systematic racial residential segregation as discussed earlier. Ongoing ecological devastation heaped upon black communities means black health is disproportionately jeopardized. According to Kyle, the attack on black bodies is an air, land, and material assault since airborne toxins, contaminated soil and water, and failing infrastructure compound endangering black health.

She also names commercial corridor degradation, observed in the proliferation of liquor stores, fast food restaurants and loss of local businesses, mentioned in the previous chapter, as a threat to residential and ecological health. Concerning commercial corridor degradation, Kyle says, “I don’t think there's anything wrong with us enjoying the culture of our food. I'm a southern girl. I love fried chicken and fried catfish. I love collard greens. What concerns me is, if they exist in my community, rarely are we [blacks]

cooking them or own the restaurant. Rarely can we sit down and enjoy them. That to me, is [other] people monopolizing on our culture." For Kyle, the impacts of unjust urban environmental policies and practices has had long-range consequences that negatively shape black people and the communities they live in. The loss of black-owned businesses disrupts the cultural fabric of black communities and diminishes black entrepreneurial autonomy. The degradation of commercial corridors - especially in black communities - is a result of unjust planning policies and economic divestment. In light of social and economic divestment, she contends, addressing blighted conditions or boarded-up houses on a block is equally important as protesting incoming waste facilities. During our talk, she described the relationship an old, abandoned house has to environmental wellness. From the accumulation of mold and mildew to dead animals, rodents, human squatting, human and animal excrement, crime, the definition of environmental justice must expand to include the remediating physical attributes of urban neighborhoods.

Having worked with black congregations like Trinity UCC in her role at Faith and Place, she is confident black churches possess abundant resources that may be used to correct black social and environmental ills. She suggests black churches use Kwanzaa principles to develop a theological strategy for cooperative economics (Ujamaa) and self-determination (Kujichagulia).[68] Since "This is a system of racist oppression," she says, black folk cannot expect it to be dismantled by those who are privileged by the system.

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[68] There are seven (7) principles of Kwanzaa: Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith). For more on Kwanzaa see: "The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa" National Museum of African American History and Culture. Smithsonian. https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/seven-principles-kwanzaa Accessed January 16, 2023.

Instead, people of color must galvanize their resources and deconstruct /reconstruct systems that support their social and environmental health. Throughout my interview with Rev. Moss III, he, too, named principles similar to those found in Kwanzaa as driving forces for Trinity's environmental engagement. With competing priorities affecting black communities, some argue that focusing on environmental matters seems like a luxury for some black churches. The example of Trinity argues the exact opposite; advocating for environmental justice within black communities is a signature piece of the ministry because it is directly tied to black social welfare (Banks 2021).

For Rev. Moss III, local environmental injustice is connected to global eco-justice because of the disproportionate impacts on women, children, and developing countries; "Ecojustice is a way for everyone on the planet to recognize our common connection to the Earth and our common connection to each other" (Kennel-Shank 2017, para. 5). It is a means to deconstruct oppressive structures that place an undue burden on one group of people based on racial-ethnic identity and or social status. For him, our shared connection to the Earth and one another requires we employ methods that will not reinforce oppressive structures. He says, "When we recognize the interdependence and interconnection in nature, we begin to build human systems that are independent and interconnected, based on justice and love" (Kennel-Shank 2017, para. 7). According to Rev. Moss III, looking to nature and natural systems for answers to some of our most pressing environmental issues hearken to African cosmologies that related to nature and shapes the role of the black church's future.[69]

[69] Biomimicry is a model for how TUCC responds to social issues like environmental injustice (Moss 2022). According to Freya Mathews, environmental philosopher at Latrobe University in Melbourne, Australia, the concept, which emerged

PLEASANT HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH

Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, located in Baltimore, Maryland, was established in 1933 when two congregations - Good Hope Mission and Mount Pleasant - merged. Over time, it became a staple in the North Baltimore community.[70] Unlike the other two predominantly black churches featured in this dissertation, Pleasant Hope is not a megachurch. In fact, the average in-person Sunday worship attendance is approximately 120 people. This underscores how black church environmental activism is not just a phenomenon of black megachurches. Small urban black churches are responding to contextual environmental ills as their capacity affords, and Pleasant Hope is a significant example of what can be done. The church's former pastor (he left to give his full

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in the late 1990's, "moved us closer to the goal of planetary ecological integrity than the traditional environment movement ever managed to do" (2011). This a bold statement given the fact that biomimicry is still a growing field of study, increasingly adopted by engineering schools such a MIT. Associated with biologist Janine Benyus (2002) and economists Amory and Hunter Lovins, biomimicry is defined as "a new science that studies nature's models and then imitates or takes inspiration from these designs and processes to solve human problems, eg a solar cell inspired by a leaf…a new way of viewing and valuing nature. It introduces an era based not on what we can *extract* from the natural world, but on what we can *learn* from it" (Matthews 2011).

[70] The 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) assigns the church to Block Group 2 Census Tract 2712, which is comprised of 1,295 residents who live in the 0.2 square mile area. This community has a racial makeup of 44% white and 35% black. 47% have a bachelor's degree or higher. Per capita income is $40,034; data is inconclusive about the percentage of those who live in poverty. In the larger Baltimore area, 27% of residents live in poverty, and in the zip code area (21212), 12% live in poverty. According to the same survey, 5.1 to 10.6 percent of households in the same census tract receives public assistance and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). The National Center for Education Statistics found that 69% of children in the zip code area are eligible for free and reduced lunch - the national average is 49%. Obesity (32%) and diabetes (12%) rates are higher in the zip code area where the church is located than in the U.S., 29% and 10%, respectively. These figures paint a grim picture of the social determinants of health in the block group and zip code, which includes Pleasant Hope.

attention to the his organization), Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III stated in an interview while he was still the pastor that the church's location on "The west side of York Road, which was traditionally segregated with whites living on the west and blacks on the east…suggests that because it's a primarily black church on the other [west] side of York Road it's vulnerable" to racial and economic strong-arming. A proposal to expand businesses required additional parking to accommodate increased vehicular traffic, which made vacant land next to the church a viable solution. But, Rev. Dr. Brown III and Pleasant Hope had been negotiating the purchase of the lot to expand its community garden - from which produce was donated to local food shelters to curtail limited food accessibility for residents in the community. For Rev. Dr. Brown III, as a historically black congregation situated on the west side of York Road, they were especially vulnerable to redevelopment plans that could forcibly relocate the church and their activities (Bednar 2012).[71]

Historically, the church had a socially-conscious focus on youth ministry and working on various programs with the NAACP. Even more, according to archived blog material on the church's website, there has been ongoing education around themes like black liberation theology, womanism, and social justice. Thus, in the wake of 25-year-old Freddie Gray's death in 2015 from injuries suffered in police custody, Rev. Dr. Brown III became a sought after voice for social justice and organizing. Through community-led

[71] In 2022 Rev. Dr. Brown III, stepped down from his role as senior pastor after 14 years of service to work full time for the Black Church Food Security Network, which he founded in 2015. Adam Bednar. (2012, September 12). "Pleasant Hope Pastor Claims Councilman Pushing Church Out." *Patch*. https://patch.com/maryland/northbaltimore/pleasant-hope-pastor-claims-councilman-pushing-church-out. Accessed December 14, 2022.

protests and public television appearances, he rallied sympathizers to address social inequities that unfairly impact the health and well-being of people of color. His social activism concerning excessive police violence, however, was a part of his broader activist work which included a range of issues including food accessibility, and economic divestment from communities of color in Baltimore. Consistent with most black communities, health-related issues like diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic illnesses loom within the church. Hospital visitations to ailing members, many with diet-related issues like diabetes and hypertension, led him to develop ideas to address food insecurity with access to healthy, affordable foods to combat these health related-issues.

During the city-wide protests surrounding the death of Freddie Gray, curfews were put in place limiting access to personal essentials like food. This was a double punch for low-income and minority communities already experiencing difficulties accessing healthy and affordable foods.[72] According to Rev. Brown III, black churches remain "a powerful cultural and socio-political force that has been overlooked in many food and environmental circles—they sit in a blind spot of the so-called Good Food Movement" (Clark 2018, para. 20). A 1,500 square foot garden the church had begun in 2010 as a part of a congregation-wide Earth Day celebration became ground zero for assisting residents and other churches impacted by the social unrest. According to an article by Amy L. Sherman, "The mayor mandated a curfew and closed the schools, which mean[t] no free lunches for low-income students. Add in shuttered corner stores

[72] A 2015 study conducted by the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, says 23.5% of Baltimore residents live in Healthy Food Priority Areas (areas formerly known as food deserts), with blacks comprising 31.5% as compared to 8% of the city's white residents (Misiaszek et al. 2018).

and the cessation of much public transport, and city families couldn't find food and were getting hungry" (2020, para. 4). As calls from other Baltimore congregations and residents for food supply came into Pleasant Hope, Rev. Dr. Brown III recognized the church did not have the capacity to meet the need alone. So, he contacted farmer friends throughout the mid-Atlantic who began supplying fresh produce to Baltimore. Rev. Dr. Brown III said, "We transformed our multi-purpose room into a food distribution center, set up shop on street corners, and got food in the hands of people" (Sherman 2020, para. 4). Using its economic, human, and material resources, the church addressed an immediate environmental need - food insecurity.[73]

Pleasant Hope's Environmental Justice Response(s)

After becoming the pastor of Pleasant Hope in 2008, initially, he sought to initiate a partnership with a local fresh food market where he quickly observed the inflated prices for "fresh nutrient-rich produce", which led him to come up with an alternative solution. While walking back to the church after the derailed partnership attempt, a moment of what he calls "divine discontent" occurred. Fixing his eyes upon an adjacent lot, he says, he thought, "If you can't afford what they [the fresh food market] have across the street, take what you have and do what you have to do for yourself." He shared this with his congregation and got to work to transform the church's front yard into a garden.

[73] Addressing the material needs of church and non-church members hearkens to some northern urban black churches in the Great Migration like Olivet Baptist Church and Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc., who provided food, clothing, housing and job assistance to newly arrived black migrants (Grant and Grant 2013). Each of these are examples of black churches that transformed themselves into a social service center to meet community needs, fostering a long history of this model.

Although Brown "had memories of collecting string beans from his grandmother's garden and heard stories of his great-grandmother preserving the food she gathered from her farm in Virginia," he drew on the know-how and wisdom of some of the seniors in the congregation like Maxine Nicholas, for whom the church's garden is named (Colon 2010). In its infancy, the food produced from "Maxine's garden" was distributed to church members and community residents; now they sell the produce at lower prices than local markets.[74] Rev. Dr. Brown III recognized the long-term need and viability for such a project so he shared his vision for an alternative food system with black churches at the hub. In a 2020 interview, Brown said, "there's an important role for food pantries and soup kitchens in poor communities, but these relief-oriented programs don't get at the root issues." Using asset-based community development to create a sustainable community, listening tours, and other community organizing strategies, helped him identify his response: "The ultimate goal is to build a sustainable, community-centered food system anchored by black churches and black food producers and led by those most directly affected by economic inequity," (as quoted in Clark 2018). That work started with him getting into the community and listening - hearing the stories of new and long-time residents and the social and environmental challenges they faced.

As an extension of the environmental justice movement, food justice aims to challenge and restructure the existing food system, to center food disparities and equity, and to connect food justice with social justice and other minority rights campaigns like immigrant rights and worker justice (Gottlieb 2009). Across the U.S., "Supermarket

[74] I might add, black churches, in contextually appropriate ways have been addressing environmental issues, of which food insecurity, is but one aspect.

abandonment of urban core communities parallels the deindustrialization and loss of jobs in those same areas, resulting in land use problems such as brownfields and food deserts" (Gottlieb 2009, 8). The prevalence of the absence of grocery stores stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables evidences the conflagration of race, ethnicity, and class inequity. The response is not as simple, however, as planting gardens. In my interview with Rev. Dr. Brown III, soil contamination due to lead topped his list of present urban environmental injustices faced by black communities. He said,

> Many other majority black cities have very high levels of lead in the soil as well. When you think about these industrial cities that became home to many families in the mid 20th century or the early to mid 20th century, we were coming for jobs in factories, warehouses, and ports. I started studying more about the impacts of these factories, smokestacks, and ports on the environment and connected that with these majority black cities. It signaled a deep concern with respect to lead and other toxins in the soils that we live on, eat from, play on - in terms of our children.

Exposure to lead by eating fruits and vegetables grown in or near lead-contaminated soil or breathing contaminated air can damage the brain and nervous system and slow growth and development - especially in children.[75] Rev. Dr. Brown III also named lead in housing, primarily old lead paint that has not been removed, as a major culprit to black well-being. Consequently, black health has been unfairly compromised by the geography of where we live, housing types, and the food we eat.

During our conversation, he described how the Home Owners Loan Corporation maps gave "rise to redlined communities where black folks were corralled and pushed into. Oftentimes, that land was nearest to cemeteries, factories, landfills or other

[75] For more on the impacts of lead exposure see: "Health Effects of Lead Exposure" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2022, September. 2. https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/prevention/health-effects.htm. Accessed January 16, 2023.

undesirable locations".[76] He added that the inordinately high respiratory issues faced by black communities result from their proximity to landfills which creates poor air quality. Additionally, the lack of trees and green space in black neighborhoods decreases air quality while allowing pavement and surfaces to absorb more heat, increasing air temperatures. For Rev. Dr. Brown III, the lack of trees and green space impacts black "health, sense of somebodiness and overall well-being." Thus, black environmental injustice must be centered in conversations and Sunday morning sermons about black social crises. Whether inside or outside the church, Rev. Brown III is using his sermons, teaching and guest lecturing as opportunities to shine a light on food insecurity and structural racism.

In "Waiting in the Wilderness," a sermon based on the gospel of Luke 1:80, which narrates John the Baptist's birth, Rev. Dr. Brown III connects John's experience in the wilderness to his congregants experience of solitude on account of quarantines related to environmental crisis like COVID-19. Though his sermon is not explicitly environmental, he uses ecological images of tumbleweed, cacti, and dry bones to connect his audiences lived experience to the biblical passage (Pleasant Hope 2021). In another sermon titled, "Their system Isn't Supposed to Work For You," he emphasizes how institutional racism at virtually every level of government has adversely affected access to quality food, affordable housing, well-paying jobs, education, and green spaces. In

[76] In the 1950's, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, a federal agency, created maps to document mortgage lending risk where "Neighborhoods considered high risk or Hazardous were often redlined by lending institutions, denying them access to capital investment which could improve the housing and economic opportunity of residents" (Mitchell 2018). The practice of redlining helped support economic and racial segregation in American cities today.

Jeremiadic fashion, he calls the system, “racist, sinful, and irredeemably wicked” before encouraging his hearers to “commit the majority of your time to building up something that can work for you, your children, and your community” (Brown 2020). Here, he points to the self-help tradition of some historical black churches that created alternative solutions to black social problems like food insecurity, day/after school care, and job and housing access.

For Rev. Dr. Brown III and some others who are named in this dissertation, church and church-affiliated organizations remain a pathway to creating alternative solutions. The Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN) connects black farmers with communities of color through black churches. In a 2023 interview with Geoff Bennett for PBS News Hour, Rev. Dr. Brown III stated there were more than 100 black farmers providing fresh produce to the 250 congregations in their network. The novelty of the network is that it provides fresh produce to food-divested communities from gardens on church properties and from local black farmers. The network aims to create a nationwide network of black churches connected to black farmers, supporting both urban and rural black communities. For Rev. Dr. Brown III, the fight to end inequitable access to food includes sensitivity and connection to the significance of environmental justice: “Because you can give free produce boxes every day of the week, but it's not going to address the fundamental issues that targeted demographics and populations are experiencing,” he shared in our interview. Thus, the BCFSN aims to provide food and reshape a food system that adversely impacts black community’s food access.

According to their website, the BCFSN is not a charitable organization but utilizes asset-based community development for black-self determination. It is more than

a distribution program; it is a way to assist local black churches with church-owned land to use their resources to address food insecurity and foster black economic investment - through church gardens and black farmers. Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative was an inspiration for the BCFSN.[77] Since the garden's inception in 2010 and the network's launch in 2015, a national food justice movement has emerged within black communities with church-led alternative sustainable food systems at the center.[78] As Rev. Dr. Brown III shared in an interview with Jewel Wicker for the Bon Appetit magazine, "Food is a sacred symbol in every Black church. I say to people often that after the pulpit, the second holiest place in the building is the kitchen. The Black church has been around for a very long time; our greatest shot at having something that extends far beyond our lifetime is planting it in our soil and watching it blossom" (2021).

In our interview, Rev. Dr. Brown III spoke about the intentionality of the name of the organization stating, "I definitely continue to speak very freely about racial issues. What I find is that to do so, helps to filter out those who are not prepared to engage the intersectional way that environmental and food issues need to be addressed." The work of

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[77] Though known for her civil rights works, Fannie Lou Hamer also formed the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Mississippi in the 1960s, which brought families together over shared land. For more information see: Monica White. (2018). *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement.* See also "Fannie Lou Hamer Founds Freedom Farm Cooperative" https://snccdigital.org/events/fannie-lou-hamer-founds-freedom-farm-cooperative/; Mayukh Sen, "The Civil Rights Icon Who Saw Freedom in Farming." *Atlas Obscura*. 2021, June,15. https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/fannie-lou-hamer-freedom-farm-cooperative. Accessed December 14, 2022.

[78] To learn more about food justice and/or the food justice movement see Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang's *Reform or Transformation? The Pivotal Role of Food Justice in the U.S. Food Movement* (2011); *Food Justice* by Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi (2013); and *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* by Alison Hope Alkon, Julian Agyeman (2011).

the food network is layered, including efforts to address food insecurity within black communities and utilize black churches, which has historically been seen as the center of black social life, as the primary organizing entity for activism (DuBois 1908).

The BCFSN website (2023) states,

> We center our work in the bosom of the Black Church because it is the oldest and most sustainable institution created by Black people. Since the late 1700s with the establishment of the first Black churches and denominations, African American churches have provided spiritual, mental, physical, economic, and political support to the freedom dreams of the Black community. While not perfect, these institutions have "staying power" and have proven its ability to sustain itself over time while facing direct attacks (arson, lynchings, assassination of its members, etc.).

The name signals to anyone who wishes to partner in the work that they are re-centering the role of African American churches in environmental justice. This is an example of how an environmental framework led Rev. Dr. Brown III to go beyond feeding people, to form a larger network that provides healthy food and supports black farmers.

FRIENDSHIP-WEST BAPTIST CHURCH

Friendship-West Baptist Church was established in 1976 by Reverend Robert L. Castle III with nine members. Following his death, Reverend Frederick D (Douglass). Haynes III, then a student at Bishop College, served as Interim Pastor. In 1983, at the age of 23, he assumed the senior pastoral position and has since expanded the scope of ministry to include socially relevant issues. Following his installation and social justice oriented ministry, the church grew to over 300 members, spurring the need for a larger space. Due to impressive growth, Friendship-West moved five times before establishing

itself in 2006 at its current location in Dallas. According to the church's website, since 1983, they have grown to more than 13,000 members.[79]

Currently, the West Kiest location (their previous location) serves as the Frederick Douglass Human Services and Justice Center. According to the church's official website, "Beyond the Walls" is a slogan that summarizes their concept of ministry and drives the work they do (friendshipwest.org/about-us). Their justice work includes but is not limited to social, economic, food, gender, civic, and environmental justice throughout Dallas and surrounding communities. Rev. Haynes III has been long recognized as a Jeremiadic voice for the oppressed (in 2023, he took over the leadership of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition from Rev. Jesse Jackson). In 2021 he addressed Texas Republicans' voting restrictions, stating, "Unfortunately we have those in leadership in Texas government who have in their ideological DNA the same mindset ... of those individuals who upheld Jim and Jane Crow segregation" (Ura 2021). Rev. Haynes III, and Friendship-West have historically expressed a commitment to ministry that takes into account the social realities of its members and surrounding community.

In a sermon given at the Green the Church Summit in 2018, Rev. Dr. Hayes III said, "It's almost impossible to live healthy in a world that is sick. How do you expect to experience wholeness, when the climate is broken? How do we expect to fulfill the

[79] According to the American Community Survey (2021), the church is at the southern edge of Block Group 3 Tract 111.01. This block group has a population of 1,696 in its 0.7 square mile area. 66% of residents identify as black, 4% as white, and 29% as Hispanic. 13.4% have a bachelor's degree or higher. Per capita income is $22,332 for the block group and $44,145 for zip code 75232. Poverty data is inconclusive for this block group, but 25% living in the zip code area live in poverty (ACS 2015-2019). The survey also notes that most people needing services in the zip code area will come from sections north of the church (ACS, 2012-2016).

possibility of humanity when a toxic climate infects and affects all that we can become? This green the church conference is a matter of life and death." These sermonic queries were used to draw his audience's attention to the debilitating effects of climate change, air, water, soil contamination, and pollution that threaten human potential. He draws upon environmental testimonies to describe the cruel impacts of environmentally unjust policies and practices. In his narration of witnesses to environmental racism, he spoke about persistent noxious odors, and the loss of loved ones to carcinogens related to toxic pollutants. In his sermon, he invited his audience to resist the temptation to normalize uneven environmental burden, which inordinately impacts black, brown, and poor communities, pointing out that "Whenever we deal with climate change and the environment, we cannot ignore the fact that there's been a systemic determination to always put that which is unhealthy in communities of color and communities that are populated by those who are impoverished and politically most vulnerable (Haynes 2019). Rev. Haynes III and Friendship-West are not shy about expressing their concern over social and environmental justice issues that affect residents in the south sector of Dallas and aboard.

Their international impact includes adopting Emmanuel Baptist Church in Harare, Zimbabwe Africa - where Friendship-West helps to fund construction projects like a sanctuary, child day care center, and a school. Also, they facilitate a hunger relief program that services families in Harare, Zimbabwe. Additionally, they have sponsored the construction of fresh water wells in Haiti. Through nearly 45 ministries, full-time and support staff persons drive the vision and mission of "connecting people to Jesus Christ and fighting for justice, while creating the beloved community" and "Creatively making

disciples, while on the cutting edge, making a difference spiritually and socially," respectively (friendshipwest.org).

Under the direction of Rev. Danielle Ayers, pastor of the Friendship-West Baptist Church's justice ministries, the church seeks ways to advocate for its members and community through programming for legal assistance; employment referral, political action; and youth. These programs are critical to neighboring residents since the church is on the south side of Dallas, comprising a predominantly black and Hispanic low-income population. According to the church's website, environmental justice is named as one of the essential impact areas of the justice ministry. Reflecting the emphases of the BCHFSN, Rev. Ayers, "provides leadership to the Village Co-op which consists of a community garden, a Fair Trade Justice program and a supply chain support for farmers" (www.friendshipwest.org/team/danielle-ayers). Friendship' West's commitment to explicitly name environmental justice as a prominent theme in justice ministries stands as a call for the potential role of black churches across the country and their engagement in environmental activism.[80]

In a sermon entitled, "A Revolution in the Wilderness," Pastor Ayers uses Matthew 4 which recounts Jesus being driven into the wilderness. She describes the wilderness as a

> Geographical location is a landscape that is untamed, uninhabited, and its where domestic animals may graze or where wild animals may live. It is also a space of land that is desolate and impassable. While the wilderness has some geographical

[80] In the wake of COVID-19, Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, became one of the first religious institutions in Dallas to serve as a free testing site for local residents. To learn more about the role of religious institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic and aftermath, please see: Stephanie C. Boddie, and Jerry Z. Park. (2022). "Racializing Religious Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Racialized Health, COVID-19, and Religious Responses*. 17-26.

> features, what's more important is what it represents - danger and disorder. In a biblical sense the wilderness becomes a locale for intense experiences where food and water may be needed - as in when the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Or a time when you wander in a place of isolation as with Elijah when he heard a still small voice. Or it could be an area of danger and divine deliverance as in the case of Hagar and Ishmael. Or it could be a time to have an encounter with the divine as in the case of Moses who ran into a burning bush on the backside of the desert. (Church 2022)

Here, the wilderness becomes a place for personal and communal revolution. She goes on to say that Jesus, who was living under Roman oppression "knows about land grabbing, food insecurity, and taxation," driving home the point of how oppressive systems and policies impacted the lived realities of those in Jesus 'day and ours. She uses the imagery of the wilderness as an opportunity for revolution against social and environmental oppression.

In a bible teaching, she states, "Freedom is a constant struggle" as she inspires listeners to strive for social justice, which is inclusive of the environment. Using the Matthian text (21:12-13) which narrates Jesus 'entrance into the temple and overturning of the money changers, she argues for economic justice and freedom from labor exploitation, as was apparent in sharecropping (Ayers 2023). Although this teaching does not center environmental themes, her reference to sharecropping resonates with the largely black southern church, who may have had relatives who were sharecroppers. Also, in a town hall talk that focused on the history of land ownership in the southern sector of Dallas she said, "Land is a valuable resource; access to and ownership of land provides a level of independence. It creates opportunities to meet the needs of communities through community development and individual families. Land is a fundamental asset in terms of wealth building" (Risk 2020). She referenced Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law* (2017) to talk about the intentionality of race-based

policies that created black neighborhoods and not only compromised their environmental health but stripped them of the opportunity to build wealth through land ownership and home buying. Ayer's explanation demonstrates the thoroughness of her understanding of environmental justice issues and its sub themes. For her, social justice ministry includes environmental themes like land, housing, and air, water, and soil contamination as I explicate next.

Friendship-West's Environmental Justice Response(s)

In 2017, just under 10 miles away from Friendship-West Baptist Church, business owners offered their vacant land to truckers who were hauling shingles, as a location for dumping. The property was/is located in the Floral Farms section of south Dallas near Joppa, a historic area settled by formerly enslaved people, in the vicinity of Friendship-West Baptist Church.[81] Permits were required to operate the recycling operation, although they were never obtained. The illegal dumping site was opened in this largely black and Latino agricultural community where existing unwanted environmental activities included but were not limited to "industrial rail yards, chemical plants, concrete mixing facilities, warehouses that lure up to 100 diesel trucks per day and a massive landfill" were already located (Fears 2020). The decision to situate an illegal toxic waste landfill in a mostly minority residential community is an extension of historical anti-environmental practices steeped in racist ideologies.

[81] It is worth noting the McCommas Bluff Landfill - a 996- acre site - is a mile away and open to Dallas residents and commercial businesses for disposal use. However, owners of the site thought drivers would readily pay to dump in their site instead of the landfill to take advantage of decreased wait times and paperwork, and they were right.

The illegal recycling operation that emerged in January of 2018 was grinding shingles into dust and emitting fine particulate matter into the air.[82] When the company moved into the vacant lot less than 100 feet from Marsha Jackson's home, within two weeks, what has become known as "shingle mountain" emerged. Almost immediately, she and her neighbors began to experience health consequences as tiny glass fibers and formaldehyde went airborne as roof shingles were ground into heaps. Unsurprisingly, in my interview with Jackson, she named toxic air pollution caused by heavy industrial companies and zoning and planning as major urban environmental issues. According to Ms. Jackson, black soot appeared on homes in the neighborhood due to the grinding. She said, "I began to cough up black smut; my neighbor did too - he had to go to the hospital…my friends and neighbors down the street had little kids and their son had to go to the hospital because he couldn't breathe." The impact of grinding up more than 100,000 tons of roofing shingles was sensory and material since there was diminished air quality, and a roof-shingle mountain rose 60 feet in the air in her backyard (Mayo 2022).

It took Ms. Jackson nearly six months to get a response to her initial complaints about Shingle Mountain. After a chance meeting that brought her into contact with Robert Wilonsky, a Dallas journalist, awareness of the mountain spread thanks to his more than sixteen articles on the issue. More than a year after Ms. Jackson's initial complaints, religious institutions like Friendship-West Baptist Church began publicly calling out city officials for their lack of action. In my interview with Rev. Ayers, she

[82] Comparatively, the zip code areas for the church and illegal dumping site both have a 10.0 mcg/m3 air pollution rate - fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) - while the state of Texas is at 8.7 mcg/m3 and the U.S. benchmark is 6.7 mcg/m3 (Broadstreet 2021). According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2022) exposure to fine particulate matter may affect both your lungs and your heart.

recounted that Marsha Jackson's cousin, a member of Friendshi-West Baptist, approached her one day and informed her about the environmental circumstances Marsha and her community were up against. In a followup meeting with Rev. Ayers, Marsha talked about the emergence of shingle mountain, the City Council's non responsiveness to her call for action, and deleterious health impacts.

Hearing Ms. Jackson's story, Rev. Ayers educated herself and others on historical environmental injustices and had conversations with eco-activists already in the field. After reading a study on the life expectancy of residents living in the northern sector versus those living in the southern sector of Dallas, Rev. Ayers' interest in food and environmental justice - especially relating to clean air and water - was piqued. She coordinated the church's audio-visual ministry to film Ms. Jackson and her neighbors. The short films aimed to publicize environmental injustice faced by residents in Floral Farms in their own words. In our interview, Ms. Jackson connected environmental injustice and public health, stating "When I walked my dog, I had to wear long sleeve shirts; my fourteen year-old granddaughter who lives with me had to wear long sleeve shirts as well because that stuff got on our skin in and in our throats." She continued, "I'm taking over sixteen different kinds of medicines. I'm so tired of going to the ear, nose and throat doctor," underscoring acute and long term impacts on her health and well-being linked to the illegal roofing shingle site.

Friendship-West used the tools at its fingertips, which included amplifying awareness of shingle mountain through various media sources to which they had access. They "organized days of action, held press conferences, conducted interviews, and advocated for decision-makers to take action against the owners of the property. They

used easily accessible tools such as Facebook Live and smartphones to engage their congregation and the community" ("Friendship-West / Shingle Mountain Article." 2023). This is an example of how black church involvement in environmentalism can make a difference. Drawing on Smith (1996), Kyle and Kearns offer that churches like Friendship-West serve as:

> movement midwives in that they help new organizations and relationships form. For community, advocacy, or protest groups, houses of worship can provide critical meeting space, financial and organizational resources, and fundraising opportunities, as well as communication channels such as bulletins, Facebook pages, and member directories to aid in sharing information or announcing events. At the mundane level, they have "enterprise tools"—copiers, computers, storage space, secretarial or legal help, and organizing know-how. (2018, 60)

By using the tools at their disposal, Friendship-West increased awareness through congregational turnout at demonstrations in Floral Farms and council meetings. In an online article posted on the Green the Church website spotlighting Rev. Ayers, and their response to Shingle Mountain, the author writes, "While some churches may hesitate to engage in community affairs, Friendship-West sees Jesus as savior and liberator, and faith moves them into the public square," describing the church's history of social justice activism ("Friendship-West / Shingle Mountain Article." 2023).[83]

One crucial aspect, highlighted in my interview with Rev. Ayers, was focusing on the importance of the role of and voices of women - especially black women - in the fight for environmental justice in this project. She said, "It can't be over appreciated, the way

[83] It is worth noting that during our interview, Ms. Jackson stated that her calls for assistance initially went unheard at the church where she was a member of for more than thirty years. However, this is not uncommon since, from her perspective, the black church's reticence to get involved in environmental issues is due to them not wanting to make enemies. However, Friendship-West's willingness to tackle shingle mountain was due to its history of social justice activism.

in which you [the interviewer] are intentional about centering the voice of black women in this work and in the church. Unfortunately, black women have been the backbone and continue to be the backbone of many movements, including churches - institutional church - and too often their work doesn't get noticed." Describing the role of women - especially black women - in environmental justice corrects narratives that have relegated the role of women, particularly women of faith, in environmental justice activism to supporting roles.

Yet, the response to her complaints was not what she anticipated; instead, city councilperson Tennell Atkins said, "My district is 58 square miles. It's difficult to police. I have a whole lot of illegal dumping because it's so huge" (Fears 2020). So, the fight continued. During our interview, Ms. Jackson said in response to their incessant complaints, "The city came down and put violations [on residents' doors] because their trashcan was still out after the trash pickup day. So they were harassing the residents." Nevertheless, she continued to galvanize a group of concerned citizens to protest the illegal site and call for remediation. What became the Southern Sector Rising, as they named their group, aims to protect and address environmental injustice in Floral Farms and other communities of color since "Black and Brown folks are forced to live side by side heavy industry in a way that nobody else in Dallas is forced to live," according to environmental activist Jim Schermbeck, because of a lack of zoning regulations (Goodman 2022). Ms. Jackson built a strong coalition of support from local churches and organizations to remove shingle mountain. While Friendship-West was a leader, they were not the only ones, and perhaps their presence encouraged other churches and organizations to get involved.

Alongside naming clean water and fresh air as significant environmental injustices, in my interview with Rev. Ayers, she listed food apartheid as an urban environmental challenge faced by many minority communities. She added that some black residential neighborhoods have been situated next to commercial and industrial uses that have led to contaminated water, land, and air. Historically, land use is related to racially motivated zoning policies that negatively affected black communities. She said,

> What good is talking about eating healthy [foods] if the water you wash your food in is contaminated? If you grow your own food but have particles floating in the air, landing on it, and getting in the soil, then it's a moot point to try to grow fresh vegetables and produce. A big part of that [disparity in life expectancy] was attributed to a lack of access to healthy food options… and that contributes to us dying faster, and more susceptible to diseases such as high blood pressure, etc.

This is an important argument in relation to the focus on improving community health through access to fresh food that they grow. Clean air, water, and soil are necessary to growing healthy food. During our interview, Rev. Ayers stated that nearly fifteen years ago, while reading a study which revealed lower life expectancy rates for residents living on the South Side of Dallas as compared to the North Side, she understood the connection between the environment, healthy food options, and life expectancy given one's social and geographical location.

For Rev. Danielle Ayers, racist zoning that allows for illegal dumping and residential use in the same space is directly correlated to compromised health and wellness for black folk. In our conversation, she described how inequitable and unjust planning procedures situate toxic-producing companies and landfills in black communities and near predominately black colleges and universities. While Jackson fought to remove shingle mountain, the situation at Paul Quinn College, a historically black university that is situated near the Lane Plating Superfund Site where hexavalent

chromium was found, is more difficult to address. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, hexavalent chromium is a form of chromium, which is a naturally occurring element in rocks, animals, plants, soil, and volcanic dust and gases, and is used in stainless steel production, leather tanning, textile manufacturing, and wood preservation (2023). Chromium exposure impacts the environment and human health as leakage from chromium mines, and improper disposal of mining tools may contribute to water and air pollution (Ukhurebor et. Al. (2023). A recent report entitled, "*Effect of hexavalent chromium on the environment and removal techniques: A review*" states: "Humans are generally exposed to heavy metals like Cr(VI) through three main ways, by adsorption through the skin, ingestion (drinking or eating), or inhalation (breathing) of Cr-containing particles" (2021, 4). For Rev. Ayers, both instances evidence systematic targeting and black expendability.

The disproportionate siting of toxic landfills, as Rev. Ayers states, is evident in the fact that there are some

> 26 or 27 landfills south of downtown [Dallas], and you don't find that up north. How is that possible? How is it that all of these landfills happen to land in South Dallas, southeast Dallas, and West Dallas?… It's not only the racist zoning policies, it's the disregard for, in my opinion, of the humanity of the people who live south of downtown.[84]

Furthermore, in areas like West Dallas, with a high concentration of lead in the soil, remediation efforts did not occur until recent gentrification. Black residents and affordable housing have been pushed out and replaced by half-a-million-dollar homes pricing out long-time residents. Rev. Ayers continues describing the situation

[84] Studies conducted by Paul Quinn College note that nearly 300 industrial sites in Dallas are located in Black and Latino communities (Fears, 2020).

> For me, it's a structural violence that we have to address. We often see the physical violence because it's traumatizing - like a George Floyd murder, right on camera. But how do we also see the ways in which structural violence is just as deadly? It's slower, and oftentimes, quiet. Nevertheless, it's just as deadly to our bodies… it's racist zoning, because you don't see this anywhere else in the city, not to the extent that you do south of downtown, which again, is predominantly black, brown, and poor communities.

This discrepancy was not accidental but intentional, Rev. Danielle Ayers avers. According to Jackson, her community is zoned as agricultural; but next to her home is zoned IRIM, which is listed in the City of Dallas zoning maps to indicate industrial research district (the IR) and industrial manufacturing district (the IM). This means that next to a agriculturally zoned area is heavy industrial manufacturing. The Dallas waste analysis noted acute and chronic health-conditions related to breathing air that contains shingle fibers and formaldehyde (Fears 2020). According to the lawsuit Jackson filed against Blue Star Recycling, LLC, not only did the illegal open-air landfill produce black dust, resulting in poor air quality, health but it also attracted vermin and had a persistent odor.[85]

For Rev. Ayers, what began with an exploration of food apartheid turned to a broader look at the environment - and how it was suffocating black life because of illegal dumping, airborne toxins, contaminated soil, and food. Working to connect her predominately black church, however, with environmental issues meant addressing stereotypes that frame environmentalism. She expressed:

> For me, it started about fifteen years ago, the point of departure was food apartheid; and more recently, it became the environment - when we began to work with Marsha on shingle mountain. It was certainly shingle mountain where we were really trying to bring attention to what's happening there and connect the congregation to this issue. When we talk about climate change, or environmental

[85] To learn more on Marsha Jackson v Blue Star Recycling, LLC see: *Jackson v. Blue Star Recycling, LLC*, Civil Action No. 3:20-cv-00967-M (N.D. Tex. Mar. 26, 2021)

> justice, some people think that's something that other people do. We're thinking, that's what white people talk about. They're worried about the trees and the forests. But, no! Let's be clear, when you hear about cancer alley in Louisiana and other places like Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi, these [environmental issues] are not natural. This comes from neglect, from not being attentive to infrastructure, and allowing these systems to fail. Then you have poor and black and brown communities who are left with old infrastructure.

In conversations with others, she says she named intentional efforts to target black communities: This comes from neglect, this comes from not being attentive to infrastructure, and allowing these systems to fail. The reality is most of the white folks move out to the other places, where the infrastructure is new. You have poor and black and brown communities left out of infrastructure," which recalls Veronica Kyle and Rev. Otis Moss's sentiments about failing infrastructure near his Southside Chicago church. Citing Melanie L. Harris, Rev. Ayers talked about ecomemory as a tool to reconnect black folk to environmentalism.[86] Once others began to understand the connections between race, environment, health, and the systemic ways particular communities have been targeted for environmental justice, they were able to support Ms. Jackson. Nearly three years after Marsha Jackson first complained to city officials about shingle mountain, it has been removed from Floral Farms.

Facing city and state charges, Christopher Ganter, owner of Blue Star Recycling, LLC, the company that used the lot adjacent to Jackson's home as a site for illegal dumping, filed for bankruptcy, stating the cost to remove the shingles would be too high. Nearly two years later, the City of Dallas worked with the landowners on a cleanup

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[86] In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (2017), Harris describes ecomemory as a tool for re-narrating traditional environmental histories that have overlooked the environmental experiences of black people.

strategy. In a 2020 interview, professor of history, Michael Phillips stated, “Shingle Mountain to me represents a new Confederate monument that symbolizes the white supremacist mind-set in Dallas since it was established as a village in the 1840s” (Fears 2020). Shingle mountain is evidence of historical racial conflict and growing environmental injustice aimed at blacks and people of color in Dallas. According to City Councilman Atkins, the shingle material was removed and processed at McCommas Bluff Landfill, the landfill designated for residential and commercial disposal (Channel 5 NBCDFW 2021). Since the church’s involvement with Marsha Jackson and her organization, Southern Sector Rising, they have increased awareness surrounding environmental justice. Coalition building with policy institutes and the Ashley School of Architecture are helping strategize for garden projects and greenhouses. I now turn to explore more fully how some black churches and church-affiliated organizations are partnering in response to environmental issues like food justice, energy saving and green energy.

CONCLUSION

My interviews with pastors in geographically different regions of the U.S. addressing contextual environmental injustice issues demonstrate a growing number of black churches engaged in environmental activism through collaborations with church-affiliated environmental organizations like Green the Church and Faith in Place. Together, they are addressing a range of environmental crises, including but not limited to air, water, and soil pollution, garbage accumulation, food apartheid, and affordable housing. Some black churches, like Trinity UCC, are using green theologies informed by the biblical text of God’s instruction to care for the Earth. Additionally, these churches

are reclaiming black ancestral connections to the land and agricultural labor, which was fractured by enslavement, sharecropping, Jim Crow, and the Great Migration. Concerning these historical events and their impacts, Rev. Carroll, Sr. stated, "The shift [Great Migration] meant more job opportunities in industry and manufacturing, but it came at the expense of agricultural skills that were passed down from generation to generation" (as quoted in Higgs 2019). This sentiment is shared by Rev. Otis Moss III, who says, "People who had deep connection to the land were disoriented and living in spaces of rapid urbanization" (as quoted in Shimron 2020) as they moved from the rural south to the urban north. Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III notes that not only was the Bible produced by an agrarian society, but the New Testament book of Acts describes a community "where people rejected individual ownership and pooled the proceeds" (as quoted in Colon 2010) to ensure everyone's needs were met.[87] This is important to the scope of this dissertation because it points to how black liberation theologies inform some black preaching on environmental justice and thus, hopefully, shapes congregational ethos and activities.

In *Walkin' the Talk*, Julia Speller, professor of public ministry, unpacks sociological aspects of congregations, noting how they "are held together by much more than creeds, polity, and programs. Each one has an internal language or ideal found in their stories, symbols, rituals, and values" (2005, Introduction). Here, she anchors her work in scholars like Emile Durkheim, whose sociological exploration of religion led him to conclude that religion is that which strengthens social cohesion and ignites social conflict, social change, and meaning-making.[88] Speller notes that the sacred stories of

[87] See Acts 2:42-47.

[88] I have oversimplified Durkheim's studies on the sociology of religion. My aim is to point to how some congregations are means of social change in their contexts. For

today's congregants point to the historical oral tradition within African people's lives in studying congregations, especially black congregations:

> Beginning nearly four hundred years ago, African slaves gathered overtly and covertly in congregations that helped define meaning and establish a sense of belonging in a world that limited their potential and discounted their humanity. Through a strong oral tradition reminiscent of the Djoli (storyteller) of West Africa, these women and men kept the tradition alive by using stories, sermons, folk-wisdom, and songs that creatively merged the sacred and the secular aspects of life into one experience. (2005)

Hearing the stories of eco-justice activism from some black church leaders and leaders of church-affiliated organizations corrects a gap in black church studies and the role of black churches in environmental justice. Eco-autobiographical and theological work of scholars like Melanie Harris (2016a, 2017), Glave (2010), Christopher Carter, and anthropologist Ashante' M. Reese's "agricultural knowledge transmission" (2019) are also helping to reclaim black ecological heritage. Reese's concept illustrates how one generation of gardeners and farmers use their lived experiences and interactions with the land to transmit knowledge about the land to younger generations. This was the case at the George Washington Carver Garden at Trinity UCC, and Maxine's Garden at Pleasant Hope where older generations assisted in teaching younger green and garden enthusiasts about working in the soil. Transmitting agricultural knowledge is a way to reconnect black folk to their environmental heritage and disrupt stereotypes about black folks' disinterest and disengagement in environmental matters.[89]

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more on Durkheim's sociology of religion see: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912). See also Robert N. Bellah. (2017). "Durkheim and history." *Emile Durkheim*. 3-26.

[89] Reese's project is much larger than the transmission of agricultural knowledge; it is also concerned with how black people have historically created their own food-ways in spite of anti-black racism evidenced through food accessibility. In black neighborhoods and cities, there is a considerable dearth of grocery stores and access to

Through my interviews, I learned how these churches use their resources (i.e., building and land ownership) to leverage change within their communities; as Rev. Dr. Brown III explained,

> Even as private Black land owners were drained of their resources, Black churches continue to own property across the U.S. Longevity is another factor; some Black Christian congregations go back centuries, resilient in the face of an onslaught of traumas. (as quoted in Clark 2018)

Nichole Phillips, a sociology professor and director of Black Church Studies at Emory University, says the myriad of issues black communities face limit their environmental engagement. She says, "There are so many injustices in addition to environmental injustice that black communities must tackle, like mass incarceration, domestic violence, state violence against black bodies, educational inequity" (as quoted in Berger 2019). This is a commonly heard statement, reflecting that black communities are more likely to address the most visible issues. Yet, my interviews with black church leaders and grassroots organization leaders expose something more —environmental justice issues are visible issues and, thus, should not be left out, and intersect with the issues that Phillips lists. These conversations highlighted how, for many, black environmental activism is not siloed. On the contrary, it is directly tied to other issues that plague black communities.

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fresh, healthy and affordable foods than in white neighborhoods. Disagreement on terms that describe food deprivation gets at the growing scholarly and public debate surrounding black food accessibility and policies that help perpetuate such inequity. Although the term "food desert" has become widely used to describe low-income areas bereft of supermarkets, some prefer "supermarket redlining" more aptly describes how some grocery stores consciously avoid black and low-income areas (Bennett 1992; True 1992; Eisenhauer 2001; Meehan 2020). Still others prefer "food apartheid", which gets at the structural dimensions of food inequity.

For Rev. Carroll, creating a space that prioritizes the negative environmental impacts of industrialization and planning also benefits black community resilience and food access. So, the role of Green the Church is "to prepare a mechanism, a system by which busy pastors, denominational leaders, and clergy can find a place to centralize all of the work that is done around environmentalism and sustainability from a black church lens" (A. Carroll, personal communication, December 8, 2022). Reflecting on his experiences with a deacon at his childhood church teaching the young boys to fix some of the members' fences, which he now identifies as workforce development, Carroll commented: "Regardless of what you call it, we are connecting the dots of who we are and who we have always been. We are helping to decolonize the black church, to look at who we were, post chattel slavery, and who we have always been spiritually and as clans and villages" (A. Carroll, personal communication, December 8, 2022). In a sense, some black churches have been spaces that prioritized environmental justice, workforce development, and community and economic development - although it was not labeled as such.

What emerged from my interviews is that what we label black church environmental engagement occurs in various forms like urban gardens, connecting black farmers with black churches, addressing air, water, and soil contamination, creating affordable and sustainable housing, and solar panel installation or other forms of energy saving. Nonetheless, what these congregations have in common is a social justice or liberation theology that informs their eco-justice activism. Even more, they all say their environmental activism points back to the ways of their foreparents and ancestors. While large churches like Trinity UCC and Friendship-West BC have the financial resources

and people capacity to engage in substantive environmental activities like solar power and fighting political systems that look the other way regarding illegal pollution, smaller congregations like Pleasant Hope BC give more examples are addressing food access through partnerships with black farmers. Rev. Carroll says Green the Church targets larger ministries to support small church environmental activism: “A big part of our conversation is always food; big churches and small churches have food programs” in black communities. In this way, small churches are not left out of environmental activism.

Now, I turn my attention to look at some church-related environmental activists like Green the Church, Hip Hop Caucus, GreenFaith, and Creation Justice Ministries, which are working with black churches to address anti-environmentalism. Also, a look at specific areas of environmental activity, including solar energy savings, and food justice, conveys the range of black church environmental-related work through lesser profiled black urban churches like New Northside Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri; Florida Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and 31st Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia.

CHAPTER FIVE

AREAS OF ACTIVITY

INTRODUCTION

If it is true that "Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination," as Jennings (2010, 4) argues, then the responses of some black churches and church affiliated environmental organizations across the country to environmental inequities are an attempt to correct that imagery. Kimberly N. Pinder, dean of the Yale School of Art, offers that whiteness has commandeered western Christianity weaponizing it as a tool of oppression (2016). For churches like Trinity, Pleasant Hope, and Friendship-West, connecting the story of Jesus to the everyday lived stories of congregants who face environmental oppression is important to their liberation from policies and practices that unfairly target them for environmental harm. So, the role of some black churches and their affiliates in response to eco-injustice seeks to re-write the narrative of white Christian dominance and amplify black resistance in light of targeted environmental destruction.

To illustrate this, what follows are several more examples of churches and church-affiliated environmental organizations in action across the country. This helps to connect the dots, so to speak, of a nationwide black church environmental movement that has gone unprioritized by some scholars in black church studies and scholars of urban environmental justice. I have chosen to focus this section on churches working in the areas of clean energy and food justice to show that while they are located in different geographical areas, residents living in urban centers face similar challenges with respect to clean energy and food accessibility. I describe churches who are offering energy

savings options for their congregants and communities, and food justice activism to address barriers to accessing healthy foods. Also, I include churches that are pushing back against various kinds of pollution in their communities. First, I begin with a look at church-related organizations like Green the Church, who are bringing together black churches for resource sharing and coalition building.

CHURCH-RELATED ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Green the Church, an Oakland-based organization founded by Reverend Ambrose Carroll in 2010, trains and equips black congregations to use sustainable practices to fight climate change. The connection between the environment, sustainability, and cost savings was the linchpin for Carroll's engagement since black households suffer more from higher energy costs than their white counterparts.[90] With more than 1,000 partnering churches, Green the Church is bridging the black and green divide by assisting black churches in sustainability and public health initiatives. In my virtual interview with him, he added to the portrait of urban environmental injustice, describing how blacks in his context of Oakland and the Bay Area, face toxicity generated by petrochemical companies and coal factories in the Oakland port area. Because of its proximity to San Francisco, residents also experience increased pollution due to heavy traffic caused by airplanes, cars, ships, and trains leading to heightened levels of asthma and other airborne pathogens. An elevated presence of chemical companies, coal facilities, failing

[90] According to an online report released by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE), "Compared to white (non-Hispanic) households, Black households spend 43% more of their income on energy costs, Hispanic households spend 20% more, and Native American households spend 45% more" (Drehobl, Ross, and Ayala 2020).

infrastructure, legislation, and redlining are signs of the "normative neglect" of black communities which is baked in American society and sustained by white supremacy, he said.[91]

During our conversation, Rev. Carroll asserted "There has not been a successful social movement in this country without the tone and tenor of the black church," when talking about how social change happens. His ideas were shaped by watching his parents' activism in the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s, which informed his understanding of the church's role as a vehicle for social change. Reading Van Jones' *The Green Economy* helped him identify a leading issue to place his own activist passion. Then, he became a fellow of Green For All, related to Van Jones. In an interview with Eric Berger, Rev. Carroll referred to the black church as a "sleeping giant" (2019). Rev. Carroll also offered that black churches developing a "green theology" will bridge black environmental heritage to today's black environmental activism, promote sustainability in black communities, and build political and economic power (Berger 2019; Holcomb 2021). With a theology that reconsiders the relationship between God, humans and nonhumans, and the earth, a practical assessment of black churches' resources goes a long way to ensure success. During our interview, he said, "Our faith buildings are one of the largest assets we have in this country; we don't own a lot of skyscrapers, but we own a lot of church buildings. Many storefronts, and some cathedrals, need to be retrofitted. We want

[91] It is worth noting, Rev. Carroll, does not limit critique of anti-black environmental destruction to North America. Instead, he says, "There are places in the world where there has been a complete annihilation of black and brown bodies, so that the land can belong to other bodies," to describe how globally, there are systems that support black and brown subjugation and upheld by various sectors of that society (i.e., political, religious, science) and stereotypes of human worth based on race or ethnicity.

to be purposeful as we talk with our denominational leads about how this environmental piece is important to us." His sentiments get at how black churches - as religious structures – can offer a critique of societal macrostructures and have "possessions and property" at their economic disposal.[92]

In an interview with journalist, Kim Noble, the former chief operating officer of Green the Church, stated that the present climate crisis and pollution most impacts low-income communities and people of color, yet, they receive the least and last response. More often than not, they are left out of environmental conversations that affect them the most. Insert the role of black churches. She says, "There's never been a successful social justice movement without the presence, will, and power of the Black Church behind it" echoing Rev. Carroll's claim (Holcomb 2021). As a "sleeping giant," the role of black churches in environmental justice is promising. Whether raising public attention about illegal dumping, challenging polluting facilities, installing solar panels, offering energy-efficient training, or carbon footprint reduction education, some black churches are providing avenues for their congregants to get involved in environmental activism.

Another example of an environmentally focused black-led ministry is, Reverend Lennox Yearwood's Hip Hop Caucus, which works to address anti-black environmental devastation, and other anti-racism work. The Caucus taps into a vast network of entertainment personalities in supporting Think100% - a project dedicated to advocating

[92] According to Zuidervaart (2013), societal macrostructures include civil society, proprietary economy, and administrative state, which religion may critique. Religion, more aptly religious communities, and their activity in the civic sector means they often possess an array of assets like physical property, financial and human capital. To learn more about Hegel's concept of possessions and property, see Hegel Georg W. F. (1991) Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Wood Allen Wood (ed.), Nisbet Hugh Barr (trans.).

for climate action among people of color and indigenous folk. According to their website, Think100% offers podcasts, films, music, and activism events all dedicated to advocating environmentalism from black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) perspectives.[93] The Think100% #ClimateFriday is a weekly broadcast that focuses on climate related issues and offers analysis of current environmental decisions and policies. Also, a three-part short film called, "Swollen: Dispatches from the Flooded Midwest" spotlights increased flooding and its impacts on black and brown communities in three Midwest US cities. Think100% invites black churches and clergy to divest from oil, gas, and coal and invest in renewable energy. In partnership with GreenFaith, Rev. Yearwood led month-long webinars on eco-leadership in black churches. In a video for Beyond Carbon, a campaign spearheaded by Michael Bloomberg, he states, "Climate crisis is a civil rights issue as its impacts disproportionately affect black commonalties. Fifty years after the first clean air act, almost half of Americans still breathe unhealthy air, particularly in low income communities and in communities of color" (Beyond Carbon 2019).

Though working to address climate and environmental crises around the world, the work of GreenFaith, founded in 1992 in New Jersey, include outreach events, eco-theology education, organizing trainings and activist campaigns from the local level to the international level (Shattuck 2021). Reverend Ronald B. Tuff, an associate pastor at First Bethel Baptist Church in Irvington, New Jersey, and Director of Paterson Task Force - a weatherization agency - has led the charge among black congregations for environmentally sustainable practices like solar installation with GreenFaith as its

[93] To learn more about Think100% see: Hip Hop Caucus https://hiphopcaucus.org and https://think100climate.com/

engagement officer for New Jersey with an emphasis on black church engagement (GreenFaith 2023). Rev. Tuff has led environmental justice tours to educate those living in suburban areas on the issues facing urban communities like Newark and Paterson, as well as helping urban pastors know how to report suspected hazardous pollution, especially abnormal smells or effluent/discharge into waterways.

Creation Justice Ministries, formerly the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program, was founded in 1983 to mobilize Christian individuals, congregations, and denominations to creation care and environmental justice. They define creation justice as "protecting, restoring, and rightly sharing God's creation. We seek justice for all of God's creation, including the human beings who live in it" ("About," n.d.). Most impressively, according to their website, their board of directors includes leaders from some historically black denominations, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, National Baptist Convention of America, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. The presence of African American denominational leadership in environmental and creation justice advocacy encourages clergy environmental education. It underscores how African Americans pursue environmental justice at the congregational and denominational levels.

SOLAR ENERGY SAVINGS

In 2011 Florida Avenue Baptist Church became the first African American church in Washington D.C. to rely on renewable solar energy using 44 rooftop solar panels (Fears 2011). Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Earl D. Trent Jr., the church led community reinvestment through partnerships with the Environmental Protection

Agency, Howard University, Verizon, and Fannie Mae. They are also a member of the National Black Church Environmental Initiative. They formed the Florida Avenue Renaissance Project, a nonprofit community development corporation providing residents services. Well before the solar installation, teams of congregants were already aware of racial and environmental injustice in their efforts to aid devastated New Orleans and Baton Rouge to assist in cleanup and rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Katrina, (Fears 2011).

Conversations around solar energy and solar panels "made the church more aware of our responsibility to be good stewards of God's resources" (Florida Avenue Baptist Church 2023). Noting a clean-energy divide that mirrors the digital-divide between black and white communities, the church envisioned itself as a leader in helping African American residents' homes become more energy efficient through solar panel because they reduce air pollution that causes these statistics.[94] Educating congregants and neighbors about the economic benefits of solar energy options, like lowering costs, reducing coal-fired energy, and establishing a "green ministry," helped bridge the knowledge gap between blacks and clean energy.[95] They collaborated with Volt Energy

[94] The motivation for solar panels and energy is not just to cut down on electricity costs, but to cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, and pollutants related to coal-fired electricity generation or fracking for natural gas. To learn more see "Solar Energy, Wildlife, and the Environment." n.d. Energy.Gov. https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/solar-energy-wildlife-and-environment.

[95] For more on the energy gap between white and black families see: Bridget Reed Morawski. (2020, June 24). "In America, Black families pay more for energy than white families, says study." *SPGlobal.* https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/in-america-black-families-pay-more-for-energy-than-

and provided a customized curriculum for children on energy efficiency, recycling, and energy awareness. They prioritized educating congregants of all ages and nearby residents about the benefits of clean-energy (Fears 2011).

The historic move to situate solar panels on the church's roof was practical and symbolic. Practically, it offered a remedy to the church's high electric bill; symbolically, it underscored the fact that people of color are concerned about the environment too. The church's solar panel project points to how "African American churches have historically led social change in black communities, raising awareness of civil rights in the past and now, possibly, environmental justice" (Fears 2011). Noting the disproportionate impact of environmental injustice inflicted on black communities, then Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson stated, "African Americans have more sources of pollution in their neighborhoods than others …We have mercury, neurotoxins building up in our bodies . . . mothers pass it to children" (Fears 2011). The church's solar panel project points to how "African American churches have historically led social change in black communities, raising awareness of civil rights in the past and now, possibly, environmental justice" (Fears 2011). Today, some African American churches see environmental justice as part and parcel to social justice activism - the story of this dissertation.

In 2014, when New Northside Missionary Baptist Church, in St. Louis, Missouri, installed rooftop solar panels, initially, they were understood as a cost-saving tool. Over time, they led to community conversations about clean energy's environmental and health

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white-families-says-study-59180525#:~:text=Similarly, Black homeowners annually pay,explain some of the disparity.

benefits (Yale Climate Connections Team 2022). Rev. Rodrick K. Burton, the lead pastor who l led the solar installation, is also a member of the St. Louis Clean Air Advisory Commission, board member of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, and an advocate for environmental justice. For more than a century, the church has brought black St. Louis residents together to worship; now, it is bringing them together to learn about environmentalism and sub-themes like climate change and renewable energy. Working with the US Green Building Council (USGBC) - Missouri Gateway Chapter, Rev. Burton has been a featured speaker on environmental racism in St. Louis. In an Earth Day interview Rev. Burton emphasized his responsibility as a person of faith to steward God's creation: "We're celebrating Earth day and taking time to reflect and pause and think about how this great Earth that we have is our home, and how we can best sustain it and improve and continually celebrate it…As a person of faith, I believe God gave us the Earth for everyone to enjoy and use…there's this idea that we must take care of it" (Ellisor 2022).

Rev. Burton believes, as a person of faith one should exercise creation care that supports future use. Yet, this conversation hits much closer to home for Rev. Burton, who says two-thirds of his church membership has asthma or is related to someone who does, as is true of so many churches who become environmental justice advocates. Air quality and respiratory illnesses, exactly the reasons why black church leaders name environmental justice issues as public health concerns, led him to work with professors and students at Washington University and Metropolitan Congregations United to

monitor air pollution using churches like New Northside as sampling sites.[96] The study found that black children in St. Louis accounted for 70% of children who suffer from lead poisoning; were 10 times more likely to have asthma-related emergency room visits; and twice as likely to have limited access to quality and affordable food.[97] These statistics reflect why so many black churches feel it is urgent to address air quality issues, but also, food justice, as explored below.

FOOD JUSTICE

A lack of access to affordable and quality food brought on by political decisions exacerbates the realities of already limited food pathways for many residents, fitting the description of a "food desert" as discussed previously in the section on Rev. Heber Brown's work. This term was coined in the mid 1990s to describe an area that restricts availability and affordability of food choices that support healthy lifestyles (Karpyn et al. 2019, 8). Beaulac, Kristjansson, and Cummins (2009) state food deserts "may contribute to social disparities in diet and diet-related health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease and obesity" (1). Sevilla (2021, para. 2) notes that the term is more often related to Black and Latino communities that tend to have fewer grocery stores that offer fresh fruits and vegetables and instead have a higher concentration of convenience and liquor stores that carry fewer healthy meal options than mostly white community stores. Since

[96] Tracy Hinson. "St. Louis churches partner with Washington University for air quality study." NBC 5 On Your Side. 28, Oct 2021.

[97] To learn more about environmental racism in St. Louis and its impact on poor and communities of color see: Sean. L. McManus, et al. (2019). *Environmental Racism in St. Louis*. Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic at Washington University School of Law.

the emergence of the term and studies of the issue, food desert discourse has expanded to include analysis of its economic impact, store quality, and how the supercenter phenomenon (i.e. Walmart, Target) impacts buying habits and alleviates gaps in food accessibility (Karpyn, et al. 2019).

For Karen Washington, political activist and community organizer fighting for food justice, a more appropriate term may be "food apartheid," which gets at systematic efforts that create inequitable foodways. In an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, she says, "Food apartheid looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics" (Brones 2018).[98] The objection to the term food desert is widespread among activist and scholars including Rev. Dr. Brown III who says there are historical economic, political, and racial nuances associated with food accessibility. Christian social ethicist Christopher Carter points out that "food apartheid is a decolonial term inasmuch as it makes explicit the multiple factors that shape our food system: race, income, transportation, location, and access to land, among others" (2021, 81). Further research had included an exploration of social economics within these communities, as race and economics more unevenly impact food security (Zenk et al. 2005; Baker et al. 2006; Joyner et al. 2022). What is innovative in the work of Trinity and other Chicago UCC churches, and at Pleasant Hope, is the effort to connect directly with black farmers so that the provision of healthy food benefits black people on both ends.

Another good example of this work is 31st Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. According to a CNN report, "31st Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia

[98] For more on food apartheid see: Leah Penniman. (2018). *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land.*

became the first urban church in the US to receive a USDA farmer's license for its Darrel Rollins Memorial Community Garden, which gives the community access to fresh food" (Higgs 2019). After purchasing three lots, the church cultivated a garden to produce healthy vegetables for members and residents. Partnering with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Virginia Cooperative Extension, they launched a farmers market and youth summer camps focused on health.[99] Fresh Starts Community Garden in North St. Louis converted vacant lots in urban areas into community gardens that offer fresh fruits and vegetables to residents. At its inception, Rosie Willis, the founder, had difficulty getting black churches to buy into the community garden concept. These are examples of how, in urban settings across the U.S. some black churches - small and large - are responding to the negative impacts of food injustice in their communities

Taking a different approach, Gwynn Oaks United Methodist Church in Gwynns Falls, Maryland, in partnership with Interfaith Power and Light, hosts creation care workshops and pulpit programming for churches interested in addressing environmental concerns in their communities. Gwynn Oaks created a comprehensive plan for affordable housing, tree planting, and a meditation labyrinth.[100] Today, some predominately black churches like Central Baptist Church and First Baptist Church, participate in ongoing

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[99] For more on 31st Street Baptist Church environmental activism see Julie Curti. (2017, February, 21). "Urban Gardening Ministry Brings Fresh Food to Richmond, VA." U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. See also Joey Matthews. (January 22, 2015). "Church receives national urban farm status" *Richmond Free Press*.

[100] "Gwynn Oak United Methodist Church." Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake. https://www.interfaithchesapeake.org/gwynn_oak_united_methodist_church. Accessed January 2, 2023.

efforts to raise awareness of environmental justice and food security. According to a study by BlackPAC, the environment and climate change still rank below pressing issues like healthcare, jobs, education, and policing among black voters.[101] recognizing the interconnections between these issues, leaders of black-led environmental organizations aim for black churches to champion environmental activism as a related pressing issue. Gardens are one means to address environmental othering within predominately black communities (Berger 2019).

Collectively, these examples of church-based environmental activism in relation to food in particular provides a look at how black churches - large and small - are working with local, state and federal agencies to address food insecurity/food apartheid in their communities. The creation of urban gardens on church-owned lots is just a part of the solution. The Black Church Food Security Network expands the work of local urban churches to create alternative systems for food access in light of systemic food inequities that render black and poor communities vulnerable to food apartheid by creating partnerships with farmers and organizations, with the black churches as the hub.

NATIONAL COALITION BUILDING

As I offered in chapter 1, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which took place in October 1991 in Washington DC, helped redefine the environment as a place where we engage in various activities of life (i.e. work, play, and worship). Helping to move the needle beyond connotations of wilderness

[101] For more on the study conducted by BlackPAC see: "New Poll: Black Voters are Highly Motivated to Push Our Country Back on Track" BlackPAC. 21, May 2019. https://blackpac.com/new-poll-black-voters-are-highly-motivated-to-push-our-country-back-on-track/. Accessed December 26, 2022.

or recreation, the Summit adopted *17 Principles of Environmental Justice*, which serve as a guidepost for the movement (United Church of Christ 2023). They declared, "Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction" (2023; 1). This language, however, was challenging for some within Christianity to accept. Still, out of the movement spurred on by the Summit, groups emerged like the National Black Environmental Justice Network, formed in December 1999, as a coalition of black environmental justice organizations and activists. It came from the first national gathering of leaders who came together to address environmental and health disparities specifically in black communities in the U.S. Because income and racial-ethnic identity play a significant role in socially determining proximation to environmental hazards that negatively impact public health, this Network sought to map strategies for remedying environmental inequity (Edelstein 2018; Lerner 2012).

The National Black Environmental Justice Network Strategy continues to fight for an end to racially discriminatory environmental decision-making by raising broader awareness within the Black community of the connection between pollution and poor health, and promoting sustainable communities by advancing clean production technologies, pollution strategies and economic alternatives (NBEJN 2023). They engage participants across spatial locations (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) to promote healthy and resilient communities. Their demands for sustainable practices that benefit the lives of black folk crosses disciplinary boundaries to include social determinants that impact public health. Environmental, climate, economic, racial, education, and health underscore the intersectional aspect of black life. To isolate and correct one branch without

expanding efforts to address the multifarious ways black life has been jeopardized does not address the systemic issues at play.[102]

Their faith-based coalition comprises more than 34,000 black U.S. churches representing nearly 16 million African Americans (National Black Church Initiative Environmental Initiative 2023).[103] They see themselves as continuing the work of Damu Smith, who led the National Black Environmental Justice Network until his death from cancer. Led by Rev. Anthony Evans, the Initiative seeks to eradicate racial disparities in all sectors of society, including the environment. Evans says, "God is calling upon the Black church to use its vast power to get out front on these [environmental justice] issues…we need to make sure not to forget that we need to sustain God's immaculate creation" (National Black Church Initiative Environmental Initiative 2023). Citing a "moral authority," Evans believes the church must influence environmental programs and policies that preserve the environment. He continues,

> We are here on Earth not to exploit and destroy God's creation but to be stewards of the environmental bounty that we have been given. That is the crux of the disagreement between climate change deniers and environmentalists. As we see it, to live in harmony with nature is to live in harmony with God. (National Black Church Initiative Environmental Initiative 2023)[104]

The fact that the NCIE is located in the larger National Black Church Initiative, gives it a great deal of acceptance as part of the work that the black church should be doing.

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[102] To learn more on the National Black Environmental Network and their theory of change, demands, political engagement, and "Principles of Environmental Justice" visit: National Black Environmental Network, https://www.nbejn.com/

[103] https://www.naltblackchurch.com/environment/index.html

[104] https://www.naltblackchurch.com/environment/index.html

Accordingly, the role of black churches in environmental justice activism is a moral obligation to care for creation and ensure underrepresented communities are not unjustly affected by environmental practices and policies. The churches and church-affiliated organizations I have spotlighted in this section describe the various organizational approaches being taken to address environmental degradation, and to promote the work of black churches. In creative ways, churches and their affiliates are responding to food insecurity, air, water and soil contamination, and community sustainability through partnerships with local and federal agencies.

CONCLUSION

Arguably, black churches remain one of the most important social institutions in black communities today. This is why when Dollie Burwell led a small gathering of environmental activists in protest against proposed dumping near the community of Afton in Warren County, North Carolina, she enlisted her church, Coley Springs Missionary Baptist Church, as the meeting ground. Among the benefits of black churches are their physical buildings, a volunteer base, economic resources, and land ownership. Even more, as Christian Smith (1996), professor of sociology says, churches are movement midwives. Their buildings provide a place to meet and access technologies (i.e., phones, copy machines, and now computers and wi-fi). Churches also have internal communication systems, membership rolls, and platforms for distributing news in bulletins, sermons, phone trees, newsletters, church announcements, Facebook posts, and other social media platforms.

Independently or in collaboration with grassroots organizations and government agencies, some black churches of varying denominations and sizes are remedying state-

sanctioned environmental injustice. Activists I interviewed admitted that emphasis on white environmental activism continues to be a challenge as it perpetuates stereotypes about the movement and the lack of black voices and activism despite the literature and surveys that demonstrate otherwise. Prioritizing preservation, conservation, and recreation without acknowledging how the environment has been destructive for predominantly black and low-income communities because of air, water, and soil pollution underscores black expandability. “This is racism. This is environmental racism,” Rev. Chavis exclaimed during the Warren County protests in 1982 - and environmental racism continues to persist today (Fears and Dennis 2021). Not only have blacks endured enslavement, Jim and Jane Crow laws, housing segregation, educational disenfranchisement, and voter suppression, but they continue to struggle with how black environmental health comes under siege.

My interviews with pastors, grassroots organization leaders, and institute leaders made clear that they saw their work as consistent with the tradition and perspective of many urban black churches and organizations. Also, they understood their environmental activism as a continuation of the long history of black civil and environmental resistance. As I have written describing the efforts of some black churches across the country, what is evidenced is the creative ways these churches are addressing environmental othering of people and communities of color. Black churches are challenged to address the socio-economic, and environmental conditions of their contexts for the well-being of their members. Through creating urban gardens, Trinity, Pleasant Hope, and many others are ensuring food security and improving black health outcomes. Additionally, a

comprehensive development plan that includes sustainable housing, solar energy, and rooftop gardens is a part of Trinity's role in environmental activism.

A nationwide network that connects black churches with black farmers has strengthened food access for communities of color and supported the economic viability of black agricultural workers. The examples of black church environmental engagement vary based on contextual makeup. In Dallas, Friendship-West's environmental justice response comes on the heels of illegal roof shingle dumping on the south side of the city, which constitutes predominately black and Latino persons and exemplifies that environmental justice tasks laid out in the beginning of the movement: fighting illegal toxic dumping and the disregard for the communities where it happens. Public protests, coalition building, social media content creation, and editorials were strategies the church's Justice Ministry used to get Dallas city officials to respond to requests for the site's removal. It follows the pattern laid by much smaller churches in the south, such as Charlotte Keys' Jesus People Against Pollution in Mississippi or the church related to the Newtown Florist Club in Gainesville, Georgia. Like Jackson, black women noticed how industrial waste affected the community's health.

While this project focuses on Trinity UCC, Pleasant Hope, and Friendship-West, it is crucial to acknowledge the collective effort of black churches across denominations, in various geographical regions, and church-affiliated organizations like Green the Church, GreenFaith, Faith in Place, and Hip-Hop Caucus. These entities are actively involved in black environmental activism, demonstrating a growing phenomenon of black eco-justice engagement. This collective effort underscores the need to address the gap in black

church studies and the role of black churches in urban environmental justice, a task that requires our shared commitment and recognition.

CHAPTER SIX

BLACK CHURCHES AND THE URBAN FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

Trinity UCC, Pleasant Hope BC, and Friendship-West BC, and other examples given, provide a glimpse into the role of some black churches in environmental activism across the country. Throughout my interviews with pastors like Rev. Danielle Ayers, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III, and Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, and leaders of grassroots environmental organizations like Marsha Jackson of Southern Sector Rising, Veronica Kyle, formerly of Faith in Place, and now of the Ecowomanist Institute, and Rev. Ambrose Carroll Sr. of Green the Church, I learned that some black churches - large and small - are responding to context specific urban environmental justice issues. More often than not, they are not addressing them alone but tapping into a larger, sometimes, national network of environmental organizations and activists to work alongside.

In this chapter, I situate black churches in an urban environmental future to show how black churches might act as mediators for public health in poor and communities of color. I want to lay out why all urban black churches should address environmental injustice as part of their care for black communities. The task of many black churches in urban contexts is to develop ministries that address contextual social and environmental ills because black congregants are unevenly disproportionately impacted by deleterious environmental decisions. Black churches help shape black theology and moral vocabulary; and they put it into practice; and given their economic and physical assets, they help shape the material landscape too, and have the potential to have a more significant impact on that physical landscape. Exploring why and how cities took shape,

their social characteristics, and the potential impacts of increased urbanization is necessary for understanding black churches in the urban future. Thus, I describe urban phenomena and its impacts on the environment and public health. Research in urban environmental history has traced the origins and development of many issues facing cities and the people who occupy them (Taylor 2009; Fitzpatrick 2013; (Vardoulakis, Dear, and Wilkinson 2016). For this reason, an analysis of environmental health and history needs to be complemented by describing the phenomena and role of the city in shaping public health because, as Dorceta Taylor points out in *The Environment and the People in American Cities,* "the city plays a critical role in our understanding of the relationship between people and the environment in America" (Taylor 2009, 2) by positively or negatively affecting human and nonhuman health and local and regional ecosystems. When the environment is studied in light of urban phenomena, social stratification is evidenced in how class, race, gender, labor, and economics combine to determine proximity to environmental hazards or access to environmental goods.

According to Corburn (2017):

> Urban places can be conceptualized as doubly constructed; through material and physical aspects (the buildings, streets, parks, etc., of the "built environment") and through the assigning of meanings, interpretations, narratives, perceptions, feelings and imaginations to these places. This is a central feature of the dynamic processes that help define a relational view of place and health. (3)

There is debate concerning the definitions of terms like "city" and "urban," but what is clear is that the expanding phenomenon profoundly impacts land area, natural resources,

energy consumption, infrastructure, housing, and food access, and the health of those who live within such geographical contexts as I have shared in earlier chapters.[105]

Urban may be defined as "a vibrant force field of sociospatial practices defined through its relational embeddedness and shifting positionality within a broader, inter scalar framework of patterned, regularized sociospatial interdependencies" (Brenner 2019, 3). Because the lines between urban, suburban and rural are not fixed, it cannot be described as a territory as much as a scale. Within the sociospatial scale of the urban, layered economic, institutional, political, and environmental relationships exist that impact human health and sustainability. Cities that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries differ from what we witness today regarding their geospatial scale and density. Nevertheless, some of the ills of early cities and their social characteristics continue in modern cities today (Taylor 2009; Macionis 2016). The scale of people who flocked to cities, to find work in textile factories, as machine workers, expanded infrastructure in populated areas and led to a deterioration of living standards (Stearns 2013). Dorceta Taylor (2009), professor of environmental justice says:

> American cities have wrestled with poverty, health, sanitation, housing, open space, land uses, occupational safety, and pollution for centuries. Though many environmental history accounts begin and end with wilderness and wildlife, the city plays a critical role in our understanding of the relationship between people and the environment in America. (2)

Accordingly, in this chapter I examine the consequences of urban growth such as concentrated poverty, and social inequities. I explore social, material, and legal determinants of health, like race in urban contexts to unpack deleterious impacts on

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[105] To learn more about how cities are defined and their growth see: Lewis Mumford. (1937). "What is a City?." 93-96; William H. Frey, and Zachary Zimmer. (2001). "Defining the city." *Handbook of urban studies* 1: 14-35.

human health especially for marginalized folk. I do this in part, because black church leaders have found that a "public health" framing is an effective way to raise concerns about environmental pollution.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

Environmental activism expressed through Trinity UCC, Pleasant Hope BC, Friendship-West BC and others, shines a light on how the work of some urban black churches to create alternative food systems, clear illegal dumping sites, and construct sustainable communities has material, social, and spacial, implications. Urban residential segregation disproportionately impacts black residents increasing their exposure to environmental pollutants, failing infrastructure, and inadequate housing; while decreasing access to life-saving healthcare, medical treatment, and social mobility (Williams and Collins 2001). According to Williams and Collins (2001) segregation is:

> The physical separation of the races in residential contexts. It was imposed by legislation, supported by major economic institutions, enshrined in the housing policies of the federal government, enforced by the judicial system, and legitimized by the ideology of white supremacy that was advocated by churches and other cultural institutions. (405)

Hence, people living in certain urban sections as individuals have limited choices to change the existing patterns. Social structures that support poorer health outcomes for marginalized groups enforce health disparities based on race, access to services, and planning and zoning decisions (Hutson and Wilson 2011). Social determinants are conditions in which people live that impact their health and well-being. Factors include nutritious food, clean air and water, affordable and quality housing, and education. Braveman et al. (2011) refer to "material deprivation" as the lack of the material means necessary for human survival. This includes economic means to acquire basic necessities

like food, clothing, and housing. Consequently, *material* determinants of health and *social* determinants of health may instantiate different things. For some (Singh et al. 2017; Ompad et al. 2007) the latter analyzes how social categories like race, ethnicity, sex, and gender inform access to resources that support healthy lifestyles.[106] Hence, determinants are the material, legal, and social conditions of an environment that affect the health and quality of life of a person. Cities are complex, ever-changing physical and social environments that "acts upon our biological constitution, leaving traces in our bodies," says Winz and Soderstrom (2021). In response, urban residents need to exercise their rights to the city.

The "right to the city" was introduced by Henri Lefebvre in *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), referring to the socially marginalized who were excluded from the social, economic, political, and production aspects of city life. He argued for citizens to shape

[106] According to Williams et al., (2019) racism is a primary cause of adverse health outcomes for minority groups. Life-expectancy differs among racial, ethnic, and economic groups. By describing individual discrimination, structural, and cultural racism, racist practices and health inequities are linked evidencing increased morbidity and mortality for some more than others. While social economic status (SES) plays a significant role in health outcomes, research revealed that "African Americans have a lower life expectancy at age 25 than do whites and Hispanics (or Latinos), and blacks with a college degree or more education have a lower life expectancy than do whites and Hispanics who graduated from high school" but is this data by urban context, as it seems a bit tricky, if you are portraying the effect of urbanization, to quote data that includes rural black communities, which for different reasons, may have worst health statistics.(Williams et al. 2019, 106). In essence, at every level of education and income, black health is compromised, demonstrating that SES is not a sufficient explanation. According to Williams et al., (2019) "Although segregation is increasing for Hispanics, the segregation of African Americans remains distinctive" (108) insofar as regardless of SES, blacks still occupy the bottom rung of the housing ladder. Racially segregated neighborhoods led to a proliferation of permitted and polluting industries in predominately black areas that were deemed not permissible in others. Liquor stores, nightclubs, and bodegas are permitted to operate in African American neighborhoods but prohibited in predominately white areas by zoning ordinances (Rothstein 2017).

and govern the urban spaces they inhabit. Instead of being controlled by capitalistic and market forces, urban dwellers have a right to co-produce the space they occupy. Geographer Eugene J. McCann says the right to the city is "the right not to be marginalized in decision-making, nor to be channeled into certain political discussions or decision-making processes and not into others on the basis of one's similarity to or difference from other individuals or groups" (2003, 78). The right to the city concept means citizen participatory governance is central to creating livable social spaces for all within the urban environment. In a sense, it is the right of urban citizens to claim their presence in the city and the right to human flourishing amid alienation from the means of production, power, and decision-making structures (Attoh 2011).

The social, material, and legal complexity of cities and urban phenomena may not only have adverse health impacts but produces a conception of space. For David Harvey, Professor of anthropology and geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, space is relational. Relational space means "space is neither absolute, relative or relational *in itself*, but it can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstance" (2009, 13). Conceptualizing space requires examining human activities because social practices define spatial concepts. Recognizing space and place in the human biography informs how we are shaped by our geographical locations - the physical and material aspects of the society around us - and how human, economic, and political interactions shape spatial forms. In this way, humans recognize their relationship with their context and reshape space. Because spatial forms of cities are tied to the economic, social, cultural, and political structures within the city and larger society, how space gets constructed materially, socially, and ideologically matters.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, citing Henri Lefebvre, notes how:

> Mathematics has constructed a language which attempts to define with absolute exactness the parameters, dimensions, qualities and possibilities of space. This language of space influences the way the West thinks about the world beyond earth (cosmology), the ways in which society is viewed (public/private space, city/country space), the ways in which gender roles were defined (public/domestic, home/work) and the ways in which the social world of people could be determined (the market place, the theatre). (50)

As she elucidates conceptions of space, she includes theoretical and psychological space to describe how our Western notions of space and human-nature relationships have expanded and led to radical spatial transformations. As urbanization expands ideologically and physically, it continuously reshapes the landscape transforming how people live. Migrating from urban areas to suburban fringes may still be perceived as an expansion of urbanization; thus, a "right to the city" means a right to dominate all space - urban, suburban and rural (Lefebvre 2003).

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

The right to the city concept gets at collective reshaping of cities for collective betterment, not just individual improvement. My interviews with black church pastors and grassroots organizations leaders are examples of urban residents exercising their right to the city to re-shape their social and material contexts. For the churches and church-related environmental organizations, the right to the city means understanding how social and environmental determinants have/are shaping black public health and generate creative responses to alleviate people of color from eco-injustice. As Attoh (2011) offers, the right to the city includes varying aspects of urban life like a right to accessible and

affordable housing, rights against police abuse, rights to open space, and rights to public participation in city development.

Peter Marcuse, professor of planning, and Ronald van Kempen, professor of urban geography, offer that the spatial ordering of cities is ever widening and results in increased social separation and residential clustering as I referred to earlier (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000). Churches, which function as midwives as mentioned previously, can try to overcome the effects of the physical arrangement, and foster coalitions and cooperation. The authors reminds us that the city is a dynamic mixture of who resides in it at any given time: "a city does not prosper or decline, particular groups in it do, and generally in very different fashion," (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000, 265). Cities are complex material, social, and economic places because of the many divisions that exist within them, and changing one component, may have consequences on others. Acknowledging the social structures that undergird "urban ecological security" - or the maintenance of first-class environmental services and policies that support the health of whites while fracturing the environmental security of people of color is important (Hodson and Marvin 2009).

In cities like Chicago, Dallas, and Baltimore, predominantly black neighborhoods are unfairly targeted for political, social, and economic divestment that results in physical and environmental deterioration. A vacuum of services in poor and communities of color means a reduction in access to medical and health care, grocery stores, parks, garbage collection, waste removal, and open space. In fact, no other marginalized group has experienced the high level of segregation that African Americans have (Williams and Collins 2001). According to Massey (2004) , "more than 40% of all African Americans

experience hypersegregation, a degree of racial separation that is little different from that achieved in South Africa under apartheid" (11). In an article titled, "A Research Note on Trends in Black Hypersegregation" which examined hypersegregation between 1970 and 2010, Massey and Tannen revealed that as of 2010, "roughly one-third of all black metropolitan residents lived in a hypersegregated area" (2015, 1025). Furthermore, he said, "Although the United States may have been able to elect a black President, it has not been able to eradicate hypersegregation from its urban areas, and we can continue to expect a disproportionate share of the nation's racial conflicts and disturbances to occur within these intensely segregated landscapes" (2015, 1034). His critique points to the permanence of racial residential segregation in urban areas and the uneven impacts on people of color. It is a product of institutional racism that excludes blacks from attaining social mobility of white households (Platt Boustin 2013).

Where one lives dictates access to resources and environmental exposure, and thus morbidity and mortality rates, and environmental exposure. It is the practice of race and space which is "the fundamental environmental injustice that is being constantly played out," says Fullilove (2021, para 15). Social systems relate to public health disparities between black and brown, and white communities. As people carry out the routines of their lives, the world around them influences their chances of getting sick, access to medical treatment, and the probability of premature death. Urban centers offer greater social and cultural services, but how people in the city access these services may differ. The contrasting reality of urban places is evident through its physical and social makeup. Generally, cities offer greater economic, religious, health-related, and

educational opportunities, although access to these health promoting resources varies greatly (Corburn 2017).

For the churches and church-affiliated organizations included in this dissertation, the right to the city approach has meant addressing immediate environmental harms inflicted on black and poor communities and actions to redress environmental injustice through alternative solutions, which include the creation of a nationwide black church food network, affordable and sustainable housing, tree planting, and reclaiming dumping grounds for healthier uses. For Marianne E. Krasny, professor of civic ecology, these examples of context-specific local-level environmental activism, alongside strides to address the social and material aspects of urban life, expand Lefebvre's right to the city concept to what she calls "civic ecology practices." Defined as "local environmental stewardship actions to enhance green infrastructure and community well-being in cities and other human-dominated spaces" (Krasny 2018, 3), civic ecology practices offer an opportunity for collective socio-environmental betterment. Lefebvre's right to the city resists market forces like commodification and capitalism but does not name the environment as a part of the political struggle for urban health. Though Mark Purcell, professor of urban design and planning, offers a comprehensive look at Lefebvre's vision of a city where the residents manage the urban space, he, too, only gives a scant mention of community organizations that include urban environmental issues like gentrification, environmental injustice, homelessness, and sustainability in their political work (Purcell and University of Washington 2014). For Krasny, the range of stewardship actions associated with civic ecology practices includes but is not limited to community gardening, tree planting, and solar panel installations. She avers, "Civic ecology practices

can be considered not only within the context of changing behavioral norms and attitudes and of creating new knowledge, but also from the perspectives of organizations, governance networks, and social movements" (2018, 10). Thus, the civic ecology concept extends the right of citizen participation in what public spaces could look like in relation to political access.

URBAN HEALTH IN CRISIS

The actions of black churches just described are all aimed at improving health, as those with lower socio-economic status and people of color are left out of processes that produce equitable environmental policies. This is first because those groups have less access to political processes that produce policy of any kind, and more specifically, because historically, the environmental movement has been framed as a white middle and upper-class movement, and poor and people of color have had limited access to nature recreation, living in less polluted areas, environmental education, and access to careers in environmental legislation and policy-making. Pollution is distributed unevenly among the rich and poor; although persons living in poverty spend more to redress environmental harm (Brehm and Pellow 2022; Summers and Smith 2014). Thus, poverty and the environment are interrelated to the extent that environmental degradation places further harm on the poor due to their need to address environmental damage with limited resources, because local and federal governments don't invest resources (Yamamoto and Lyman 2021. Some of the worst environmental actors have been local, state, and federal agencies, especially the military, that have sanctioned targeted environmental hazards in economically and politically depressed communities (Gelobter 1994; Wyman and Spiegel-Feld 2020).

Increased density in urban areas results in higher pollution and comprised environmental quality (Liang and Gong 2020; Carozzi and Roth 2023). Environmental, social, and lifestyle factors associated with living in urban areas are suspected to impact neurological functioning, immune development, increase childhood asthma, and stress though there are variations dependent upon race, age, and class (Gern 2010, 545). Thus, urban environmental risks like "Air pollution is an important and well-known environmental risk factor in urban areas. However, the role of reduced exposure to microbial biodiversity, vitamin D and artificial light at night, and other factors may also have important negative health impacts that beg further investigation" says Emily J Flies, lecturer at the University of Tasmania (2019, 8). Additionally, increased lead exposure in global urban cities like Sao Paulo, has been shown to adversely impact a child's central nervous system, including impaired hearing, and diminished cognition (de Freitas et al. 2007). According to Laidlaw et al. "Urban inner-city soils have been contaminated with lead primarily due to the past usage of lead additives in petrol and the deterioration of exterior lead based paints," (2017, 26), which has resulted in nearly 40% of U.S. urban youth with blood lead levels above the acceptable levels.

Increased lead levels in developing countries around the world mirror what is occurring in U.S. cities like Chicago, Illinois, and Dallas, Texas. In fact, a recent article (McCormick, Uteuova, and Moore 2022) noted that out of ten zip codes in the city of Chicago with the largest percentage of blacks and hispanics, nine zip code areas had higher than average lead levels. This includes the zip code, 60628, where Trinity United Church of Christ is located, with 92.5% black population (ZIP atlas 2023). The area surrounding Friendship- West Baptist Church and Shingle Mountain, just miles away

from the church, are both predominately black communities (53.3% and 67.6%, respectively) (ZIP atlas 2023). In an online article for *D Magazine*, writer and editor, Alex Macon (2021), reported on an environmental assessment report conducted by the City of Dallas, which concluded that soil samples from the Shingle Mountain site showed levels that were "above expected background levels." Upon further investigation, this vague conclusion was shown to point to three times the Environmental Protection Agency lead standard. Such disparate impacts on poor and marginalized communities illustrate how some people are rendered environmentally expendable.

Governments at all levels are failing to respond to health crises in urban areas in both developed and developing countries. This is where, at least within a US context, some black churches are stepping in to create alternative pathways of accessing health-related resources like Trinity UCC's urban garden and Pleasant Hope's food supply network. Proponents of health equity, which may be defined as "efforts to address avoidable social inequalities by equalizing the conditions for health for all groups, especially for those who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage or historical injustices" (Corburn 2017, 2), are advocating for multi-level solutions that range from individual to institutional to societal change. Here, transparency, impartiality in political processes, and grassroots efforts ensure equal health access to historically marginalized groups and remove barriers that would prevent them from accessing health-related resources. Uneven impacts on human health are social justice issues since race, class, gender, and economics are often associated with morbidity and mortality. In response to this, Black churches may play a key part in mediating urban environmental justice and helping to secure human health.

BRIDGING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH GAP

As stated prior, some researchers say the environmental justice movement emerged in three phases: the Warren County, North Carolina protests and the release of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (1987); summits like the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 out of which came the adoption of the 17 principles of environmental justice; and the surge of federal and local grassroots organizations addressing environmental issues in their communities (Lee 1995; Faber and McCarthy 2001). Black church leaders played a role in all three. Recognizing this is often overlooked, scholars such as Cole and Foster (2001), Honey (2007), and Hulme (2016) have gone to great lengths to expand the literature on religious environmental engagement, which includes black religious eco-activism. Black church environmental engagement has, more often than not, been categorized as something other than environmental, as sociologist Eileen M. Smith-Cavros notes, due to the "over-simplified assumption that environmental issues exist separately from social issues. Some projects performed through black churches benefit the environment but are not labeled as environmental therefore they go unrecognized" (2006, 34). In fact, black churches of varying sizes and denominations have and are laboring to correct environmental devastation in their local settings.

The community development approach described extensively in Chapter 1affords black churches an opportunity to offer faith-based interventions that help fill gaps in services for poor and underserved communities while educating congregants about healthy lifestyle choices. All three featured churches go beyond the food pantry model, to also help people grow their own food. For Trinity UCC and Pleasant Hope, the George

Washington Carver Garden, and Maxine's Garden, respectively were efforts to address food insecurity in their communities. As a springboard to addressing systemic exclusion from quality fruits and vegetables, the Black Church Food Security Network, founded by Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III emerged connecting black churches and farmers, and Trinity has done the same. For Rev. Moss III and Trinity UCC, the community garden has become a part of their larger Imani Village project. According to Wells et al. (2022), "Faith-based interventions are commonly conducted by a health ministry that connects components of faith with health concepts, often in partnership with health professionals" (2). Often, this has meant blood pressure screening clinics, or improved food pantries, cooking classes, etc, but some churches are going farther, such as Trinity United Church of Christ, where its Green Committee, a ministry focused on providing fresh fruits and vegetables, hosts a farmers market, specifically featuring produce grown by black farmers for congregants and local residents living in a "food desert" says Reverend Dr. Stacey Edwards-Dunn of Trinity United Church of Christ. In a 2017 article that featured local efforts to curb food insecurity, she elaborated, "We do not have a grocery store that offers fresh fruits and vegetables. (The nearest grocery stores are a mile or more away, placing Roseland within the category of food desert, as defined by the USDA)" (Wasney 2017). The church partners with the Greater Chicago Food Depository to service people at risk of hunger. Similarly, when Pleasant Hope Baptist Church set up food distribution stations on corners throughout their community in the wake of social protests surrounding the death of Freddie Gray, they were able to fill a gap in services when the City of Baltimore enforced curfews further limiting access to personal essentials like food. As

stated in chapter 3, the curfew significantly affected low-income and underserved communities already experiencing food insecurity.

Black churches are essential to correcting deleterious health impacts brought on by urban environmental injustice because they still represent “a place of refuge and healing for the oppressed and marginalized and remains a gateway to reach and mobilize African Americans for meaningful change and reform” (Brewer and Williams 2019, 385). Environmental health related issues like COVID-19 hit black communities and churches harder than their white counterparts (Belz 2023). According to a study entitled, “Assessing differential impacts of COVID-19 on black communities” (Millett, 2020), pre-existing health conditions, increased exposure risk due to the greater number who worked jobs that cannot be done remotely, and more dense living and transportation situations increased the likelihood of blacks becoming infected with the virus. Many black churches, adopting online modalities due to state wide mandates, used the sermon as an occasion to include health messaging to the extent that researchers noted that “Declarative statements from Black pastors sent appropriate health messages about the seriousness of COVID-19 to both parishioners and the larger Black community who depend on the church for other resources outside of spiritual guidance” (Brown et. al. 2022). Local congregations that offer faith-based interventions have an opportunity to offer context and culturally appropriate health interventions that address a range of health-related issues plaguing poor and politically disempowered communities including public health disparities brought on by increased urbanization, and offering context and culturally appropriate health interventions.

For Kendra H. Barber, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, the term “mediating structures”, first defined by Berger and Neuhaus (1977), may be more appropriate than intervening institutions because faith-based organizations are those that bridge “large bureaucratic megastructures and individual citizens” (2015, 256). As an intervening institution, black churches are challenged to respond defensively to unfair environmental practices and policies heaped upon black congregants and communities. However, as mediating institutions, black churches are a bridge for black folk to access life-supportive resources; and have the capacity to continue as that link for social service provision. In an increasingly urbanized future, the role of black churches in addressing environmental threats and environmental health related crisis, like COVID-19, will be crucial to black resident survival. Expanding black church studies to prioritize black churches environmental activism, which takes into account food access and food pathways, solar/clean energy, increasing green space and cooling trees, combatting local toxic sites, and new models of development, provides a clearer picture of how some black churches and their affiliates may correct environmental devastation and compromised public health (Akom, Shah, and Nakai 2016; Anguelovski 2014, 2015; Fears 2011). Additionally, addressing mental health, substance abuse, and health crises that affect black urban communities is a part of this vision in the fight for urban environmental justice (Brewer and Williams 2019). As an institution of racial uplift and social justice, some black churches provide support services to disadvantaged blacks including but not limited to spiritual, moral, social, and economic support. Other churches, like those highlighted in this dissertation, are naming environmental justice as a critical piece of their social justice activism that drives their community and economic development.

Though U.S. church attendance continues to decline, a Pew Research Center study shows, black people still attend church more regularly than any other racial/ethnic group (2020). Thus, Brown et. al. (2022) invites attention to black churches and the potential role they play in public health awareness. In light of COVID-19 related disparities, the authors call for increased partnerships between faith-based organizations and public health agencies to disseminate health-related messages to black communities. Health disparities motivated by stereotypes and ideologies, prevent people of color and the poor from accessing medical attention and having the financial capacity to afford better health options. Black church studies have said a lot about the church's prophetic role in civil rights but have stopped short of comprehensive literature on urban environmental injustice. Dylan C. Penningroth, professor of law and history at the University of California–Berkeley who specializes in African American history and legal history, provides a historical treatise weaving together the black church and civil rights activism; yet his "Everyday Use: A History of Civil Rights in Black Churches" (2021) does not mention the term *environment* once. Similarly, an article written by Vaughn A. Booker, professor of Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, offers a historiography of the modern civil rights movement in the U.S. in the 1950's and 60's; yet is silent on the environment (2014). Notwithstanding the work of scholars Dianne D. Glave (2010); Kate Sheppard (2015), Amanda Baugh (2015), and Rasheena Fountain (2017) the role of predominately black churches in addressing urban environmental injustice has not been prioritized although some black churches across the country are readily involved in eco-justice. Some black churches have expansive resources - large

congregations, money, land, and buildings – that aid in their partnering with faith-based organizations to promote public health initiatives increases their capacity for change.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2015), "The social ecological model understands health to be affected by the interaction between the individual, the group/community, and the physical, social, and political environments;" thus, it must be redressed at each level.[107] Community-driven responses seek to redress eco-injustice by ground-level intervention such as reclaiming vacant lands to be used as community gardens, direct actions against illegal toxic waste dumping, and energy initiatives at community scale; and therefore public policy and environmental decision-making must be reformulated, as well as ensuring long-term services for people adversely impacted by anti-environmental practices. Participating in broad-based environmental networks that include faith-based and nonreligious affiliated organizations, may contribute to decreasing disparities in chronic disease health and behavioral health changes.

According to Omar McRoberts (2001), black faith-based social activism has always taken on different forms depending on their social contexts. However, this does not instantiate that every black church assumes the role of activist in its neighborhood but that churches that have engaged in social activism, were, more often than not, addressing the pressing issues around them. In *Streets of Glory* (2003), he describes the potential roles of black churches in urban centers as a contested reality. Furthermore, as Owens

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[107] To learn more about the social ecological model which describes public health as a product of multiple factors including interactions between the individual, community, physical, social, and political environment, see Donna Jo McCloskey, Mary Anne McDonald, & Jennifer Cook. 2013. "Community engagement: definitions and organizing concepts from the literature." *Principles of Community Engagement. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

(2000) states, “Black churches do not intend their affiliated CDCs to replace urban municipal government as the provider of public goods in urban black neighborhoods” (184). They do, however, help alleviate the impacts of economic and political divestment and environmental injustice inflicted upon marginalized communities. If the significance of the historical role of black churches in addressing civil rights means anything, then, black churches social activism might assume many different forms - dependent upon social issues. Reclaiming a theology that seeks liberation of black folk from socio-environmental marginalization and aligning its practices with that mission will help to shape the role of black churches in urban environmental justice. Adopting an environmental justice paradigm predicated upon critiquing social systems and ideologies that support environmental othering offers an expanded vision for the role of black churches in the future (Lee 1995).

CONCLUSION

The potential role of black churches in the fight for urban environmental justice is just beginning to unfold. Some black churches have various resources that may be used to address environmental injustices. As an intervening or mediating institution in their communities, black churches and their affiliates bear the burden of correcting unfair social practices and policies sanctioned by local, state, and federal governments. Thus, black churches and their religious-affiliated institutions often respond by filling the gaps in social services to communities that have been economically and politically divested. Black churches, but mainly urban black churches, are thinking critically about the socio-environmental makeup that threatens to diminish human life, destabilize local ecosystems, and incapacitate existing housing, food services, and infrastructure. Some

churches like Trinity United Church of Christ, Friendship-West Baptist Church, and Pleasant Hope Baptist Church are already pursuing urban environmental justice by advocating for sustainable practices, removing deleterious sites near residential homes, and creating new foodways for the poor and people of color.

According to the United Nations, by 2050, most of the world's population will be concentrated in urban centers. However, this distribution is uneven as rapid growth is expected to occur in an excessively impact developing countries. According to Liqun Sun et al. (2020), professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, whose research includes climatology and urbanization:

> Usually, in developed countries, urban expansion is adaptable to the population growth. The residents are served by good public services and have access to adequate urban infrastructure, such as water and energy supplies, sanitation, education, and green space or parks. For many developing countries, the national economic growth and development are inadequate to meet the needs of a growing urban population. In most cases, these cities lack basic infrastructure, and face overcrowding, pollution, and other urban environmental problems. (2)

While urbanization has the potential to be a positive transforming phenomenon improving job accessibility, educational and healthcare access, and overall better quality of life, there are uneven, even unwanted, features of urbanization in terms of urban geospatial expansion, population growth, and greening at different economic levels around the world (Liqun Sun et al. 2020).

Although this project focuses on urban environmental injustice in the context of the U.S., I recognize the implications of social, political, racial, and economic factors on global public and environmental health and hope that by lifting the work of black churches, they can provide a model, or inspiration, for churches globally. The environment encompasses us all. Social structural systems of oppression render some

people more burdened by environmental injustice than others. The complex matrix of systems that make up urban places will play a vital role in predicting our environmental future. Exploring cities' socio-ecological conditions is necessary for human and planetary survival. The growing field of sustainable cities ignited discussions about the role of the future city and increased urbanization in environmental and public health (Satterthwaite 1997; Haughton and Hunter 2004; Portney 2013; Hodson and Marvin 2014). Yet, answering critical questions about the physical, natural, and ideological aspects of cities is still necessary to understand the evolutionary feature of the urban phenomenon. As I have stated previously, there are societal structures that perpetuate eco-devastation upon the most vulnerable - people of color, people experiencing poverty, and women and children - which means they are more susceptible to environmental inequities than most (Moe-Lobeda 2013; Angueovski 2013).

Agyeman says, "racism and classism are bad for the environment and bad for a broadly conceived notion of sustainability" (2008, 1) because these isms positively or adversely influence human relationships with the environment. Smart growth and urban sustainability are good, but racial, economic, and spatial dimensions of urban environmental justice must be considered. Without understanding the social, material, and legal determinants of public health, urban dwellers - especially those who are economically and politically poor and/or people of color will continue to be unevenly impacted by unjust planning and zoning decisions. Earlier conversations on sustainability centered on linkages between industrialization, economic growth, air, water, and soil pollution, human exposure to environmental risk, and the need to live within our environmental resource limits (Redclift 1993). However, since the United Nations

Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, discourse expanded beyond traditional ideas about preservation and conservation to include sustainability and social stratification.[108]

Urban sustainability enthusiasts and many religious institutions in urban centers take seriously how the physical and natural landscape of cities promote just or unjust urban living. Recentering the role of religious institutions, especially black churches, in urban environmental justice provides a lens to how black and poorer communities are addressing anti-environmental policies. Accounting for social and racial disparities in sustainability reveals how some environmentally sustainable initiatives benefit white middle and upper-class persons. In an article linking the distribution of public green spaces and race, the authors (Miller et al. 2022) state: "urban green spaces are often inequitably distributed. Understanding the relationship between green space access and socioeconomic status is critical for identifying and eliminating environmental injustices" (246). Making a case for the equitable distribution of environmental goods means naming the social structures that underpin urban environmental injustice. Here, the poor and minority communities are more frequently subjected to environmental risk than their white counterparts. Though economically and politically depressed communities are challenged to address local environmental injustices, the environmental responses from some predominately black churches are one end of the response spectrum. There are systemic patterns that must be addressed for equitable treatment.

[108] It should also be noted that environmental summits in Rio (1992) and New York (1997) pushed dialogue about sustainable development forward.

Common misconceptions about the relationship between social stratification and sustainability lead some environmental sustainability experts to confess they are saving the world without discussing the systems that support inequity and injustice (Northrup 2019; Ghosh et al. 2023). However, sustainability is inseparable from human and environmental equality. For sustainability to transform how humans engage with the physical and natural world, justice and equity must be front and center of the dialogue. A just sustainability paradigm is one that "links to both the green/New Environmental Paradigm and the brown/Environmental Justice Paradigm" (Agyeman 2008, 753) and concerns itself with quality of life, ensuring present and future generations have access to environmental health, justice, and equity, and living within environmental resource limitations.

Some black churches are exercising their "right to the city" through citizen participation to create livable social spaces that benefit everyone. Because where one lives dictates access to healthful resources, some black churches in urban centers are not only places of worshipful gatherings, but they act as social service centers. The CDC approach has allowed black churches to demonstrate institutional creativity by creating programs and services that stem the tide of existing and bourgeoning community needs. However, it often stops short of prioritizing environmental justice (Federal Reserve Bank of San Fransisco, 2014). Increasing their capacity through public and private partnerships, some black churches and their faith-based affiliates are tackling environmental issues ranging from inadequate and unaffordable housing to illegal dumping sites to supermarket abandonment in specific neighborhoods. Because there are public health impacts due to increased urbanization, black churches in urban centers are

creating ministries that address local health realities. In a sense, poor and black communities are not only expected to bear the brunt of their white counterparts' environmental negligence but also create their own solutions. The significance of the black church in the urban future lies in the fact that as the longest-standing institution in the black community, the black church has the "potential of disseminating faith-based interventions from local congregations to the state and national levels by building a culture of health through community-driven policy as well as system and environmental change" (Brewer and Williams 2019, 385). Predominately, black congregations remain sleeping giants of environmental change within African American communities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

REFLECTIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In light of the environmental and public health consequences due to ongoing and increased urbanization, more scholarship about urban environmental justice and the role of black churches in addressing issues of injustice is needed now more than ever because environmental decisions unevenly impact people and communities of color. Discussions about our planetary future must go beyond meeting our present needs while preserving natural resources for future generations to include answers to tough questions about what constitutes a just urban future that ensures equity and equality in various forms - social, environmental, and spatial (Agyeman 2013). Socio-environmental injustice gets clad in brick-and-mortar; therefore, increased scholarship that examines how urban phenomena will impact humans and non-humans in dynamic ways is needed, as is the need to include the potential role of religious organizations and actors. Urban environmental justice demands we take the consequences of living in an urbanized world - food inaccessibility, increased population density, failing infrastructure, decreased housing affordability and accessibility, pollution, unfair land use, planning and zoning decisions, limited open and recreational space, and the physical and neurological traumas associated with urban living - seriously. Addressing the complex needs of an urban future requires participation from all sectors of society. Here is where black churches and their affiliates may play a role. More specifically, mostly black churches that occupy urban spaces may play a significant role in addressing urban environmental injustice to promote healthy people and cities.

Since where we live, work, and play matters, I also offer that where we "church" does. I have used the historical legacy of black churches, their evolution during the great migration, the development of liberation theologies that now often include the environment, and some examples of contemporary urban black churches to show how black churches respond to environmental injustices. Trinity UCC, Pleasant Hope BC, and Friendship-West BC are prominent examples of black church eco-activism. However, nationwide, small and large urban black churches like Florida Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and New Northside Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri, are working to correct anti-environmental policies levied on their communities. Hence, I have provided a window into some black church environmental responses to ensure black health and community sustainability, hoping that more urban black churches will embrace an environmental justice paradigm. It is clear from the Green the Church network and others that they are.

Thus, the examples offered in this dissertation highlight some black churches engaged in eco-activism despite those who contend the vast social issues facing black communities (i.e., poverty, compromised access to healthcare, jobs, and education) prevent black churches from prioritizing the environment. It refutes the narrative that the environment is a white issue and reclaims a narrative of black ecological engagement and eco-memory to that end. The examples of urban church environmental activism provided name environmental racism as a real issue that adversely affects black communities and shows black religious responses. My research offers a view of black churches' attempts to heal broken relationships that some blacks have with the land by reclaiming African epistemologies and ancestral environmental traditions and lifts black preaching as a tool

for eco-activism and frames environmental issues in biblical language and lived experience, thus moving ecological issues to become more than just data. These examples show how black churches are working towards ensuring public health and community sustainability. Thus, we see black eco-self-determination in light of unjust policies and practices. Also, it shows how environmental justice in black churches is grounded in civil rights (i.e., Memphis Sanitation Strike) and points forward to future black church eco-social engagement with a seat at eco-political tables.

Throughout this project, I have called for black church studies to prioritize the role of black churches in urban environmental justice, both rural and urban, vice versa to bridge the gap in scholarly discourse on the two. This is because the people who make up black churches are and will be disproportionately affected by unjust environmental burdens. A history of unfair zoning and planning practices has already devastated black health and well-being. Concentrated poverty and limited access to means of social mobility in urban centers have also led to disparate health outcomes for blacks and whites. Undoing restrictive covenants, redlining, and blockbusting and toxic waste siting means confronting the realities of racist ideologies that have led to privileging one race over another. According to Zuidervaart (2013), religious communities have the moral authority to critique state power and decisions and birth socio-political change. Where inequitable eco-practices have led to increased morbidity and mortality rates among blacks, and the proliferation of liquor stores, fast food restaurants, failing infrastructure, dilapidated buildings, vacant properties, junkyards, toxic waste facilities, and limited green space means the spatial character of many urban black communities deleteriously

affects public health, black churches should insert themselves as intervening and mediating institutions, as many have done.

Glave (2010, 2017), Harris (2017), and Pinn (2001), who have contributed to black environmental engagement, provide the foundation for expanding the vision for doing ministry in an urban future because their work includes acknowledgment of black environmental heritage and attempts to reclaim black eco-narratives. Their scholarship provides stepping stones toward black religious and environmental activism. Putting their work in conversation with environmental justice scholars (Lee 1995; Taylor 2000; Bullard 2009) and critical urban theorists (Lefebvre 1991; Brenner 2019) begins to bridge a scholarly divide. Black environmental activism should include exploring the role of faith-based institutions in environmental justice because the church is still considered the center of black cultural life since collective practices, music, symbols, and rituals help create a collective identity that may motivate people to action. Through religious institutions, other community or protest groups emerge.

My interviews with pastors, leaders of grassroots organizations, and justice ministry leaders lead me to believe there is an increasing number of black churches across the country who are environmentally active but whose work has not been prioritized in scholarship. Categorized as an extension of "community development" or shadowed by false narratives that the environment is a white person's issue, black religious urban environmentalism still goes unheard in scholarship. Filling that scholarship gap is necessary to understand how, historically, blacks have engaged in environmental activism and continue to. Describing various environmental issues that three predominantly black churches in varying geographical locations are responding to

is an introduction to black church environmental activism at large. From these examples, one can learn that urban environmental justice activism begins with liberation theologies that include the environment. Each of these churches prioritizes black liberation theologies that extend beyond social and economic issues to inequities in food and housing accessibility and air, water, and soil contamination. Pastors within each church context preached sermons that included the environment or environmental justice, expanding their already existent dedicated justice ministries, and each church built a broad-based network to grow its capacity for environmental change.

For many blacks, because of the legacy of enslavement and sharecropping, farming and gardening were associated with menial labor and to be avoided, and negative environmental stories emerged from memories of events blacks heard of or encountered in the woods and swamps. In the rural south, stories of lynchings and drownings entrenched ideas of nature as unforgiving, indifferent, dangerous, and cruel. In the dirt, black folk did back-breaking work with little reward; through the woods and rivers, they ran to escape their captors. Notwithstanding, in each of my interviews with pastors and grassroots organization leaders, I learned how they were reclaiming black ecological engagement from the horrors of forced labor and uplifting narratives like farming as a way to connect ancestral environmental engagement with a younger generation of environmental activists. During my interviews with Rev. Ayers, Rev. Dr. Brown III, and Rev Carroll, each interviewee used the term “Sankofa” when talking about the process of drawing from the black ecological and spiritual legacy of grandmothers and grandfathers, their ceremonies, who farmed to teach and underscore their present work for environmental justice. Rev. Moss III and Veronica Kyle did not explicitly use the term;

however, they alluded to it as they recounted their families' environmental engagement. Their environmental justice paradigms help them confront social systems that maintain ecological disparity and relay the complex matrix of social oppression that continues to burgeoning activists.

I also learned they all had a social justice ethos upon which they forged environmental justice ministries; they saw it (EJ) as an extension of social justice. They started by addressing a local issue that affected members of their congregations (food insecurity, air quality, community sustainability), then, through teachings and sermons, they educated congregants about an environmental moral imperative. From this, I realized, in light of the historical role of black churches who have addressed the black social crisis, these churches (Trinity, Friendship-West, and Pleasant Hope) are continuing the historical civil rights legacy of black churches by seeking to address limiting social conditions within their communities today. I also learned that the network of structures and systems perpetuating environmental degradation is so complex that these congregations recognize the need to address the issue at hand while advocating for socio-structural change. The human capital (staff and volunteers) required to address the matrix is more than many black churches can support. Nevertheless, there is potential in banding together and working with organizations such as Green The Church, Faith in Place, GreenFaith, Interfaith Power and Light, or the Black Church Food Security Network so that they learn from others and benefit from the experiences of early adopters. Still, I recognize that some churches do not have the missional focus, resources, congregation, or monies to do this to the scale presented in the examples I have put forth, but that is true of every issue facing urban communities of color. Thus, I have expanded the three main

examples to include the various ways that black churches nationwide engage in environmental activism in various ways - solar panel installation, energy efficiency programs, urban gardens and expanding green space, food security, and addressing air, soil, and water contamination, and the rising heat indexes due to global warming.

In my conversation with Ambrose Carroll and Veronica Kyle, they advocated for more black churches to get on board with environmental activism, affirming that there still exists hesitancy within some black churches to embrace an environmental ethic. Thus lies the task ahead. During our interview, Ambrose Carroll stated that he has found that larger churches like Trinity and Friendship or smaller churches that have eco-aware pastors have endorsed black church eco-activism. But how does one "convert" more pastors? One place is in theological education like that at my alma mater, Drew Theological School; another is through denominational efforts such as those of the AME and COGIC churches. Working to ensure theological education is training black religious leaders on environmental issues is essential. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III, and Rev. Dr. William Barber, III, all came to the Theological School at Drew University and gave talks that have included incorporating environmental justice as a concern for black Christians, whether at the congregational or denominational levels. Indeed, environmental justice is a part of the core values of the curriculum.

Measuring the success of these churches and movement organizations is harder. but the number of churches affiliated with Green The Church tell a positive story. Concerning progress benchmarks, those I interviewed were not very precise on supportive data or how much had changed due to their advocacy work, but that is because there are various ways to measure "success". However, the impacts on their

neighborhoods, and the number of churches affiliated with Green the Church tells a positive story. Rev. Moss III said they used benchmarks like acquiring land, developing partnerships, and securing grants/funding instead of quantitative data (i.e., reducing food insecurity by 15%). Similarly, Pastor Ayers noted the difficulty in measuring success as one might a social program. For her, the "wins" are incremental - from planning for 50 people to attend an information session, meeting that goal, and passing policy at the local level to close predatory lending practices. Rev. Carroll could name how much money was expended for the Summit and attendance numbers, but he did not provide information on impact (i.e., how many solar panels have been installed) beyond general statements like, "We have reduced our carbon footprint." So, whereas I am accustomed to offering an assumption for a theory of change that will result from the strategy I employ, I did not hear the theories of change I expected to hear. The problem statement is clear (i.e., community sustainability, food insecurity, air and soil contamination), but theories of change about environmental injustice differ. I am drawing on Hornik, Cutts, and Greenly (2016), who identify three change levels (meso, macro, and micro). The larger body of work gets at community theories of change. But I am an urban planner and a scholar, looking from the outside in, and what I expected, and how those doing the work see it, reflect different vantage points. All three instances have garnered media attention, and is not that a form of success, that their stories are worth telling for others to hear? From my interviews, I learned that their theories of change ranged from working at the congregational and denominational levels to increasing the message that black religious environmentalism is essential. They also formed or helped strengthen organizations that can support a network of like-minded leaders.

Future research considerations include describing additional urban black church environmental activists nationwide since organizations like Green the Church and the Black Church Food Network have emerged and are building a broad-based black-church environmental web. Even more, a description of small urban black churches' environmental activism will help describe how they, and inner-city storefront churches (a unique sub-category) respond to the immediate socio-environmental crisis and climate crisis. This is important because the literature on black church environmental engagement is sparse. Lastly, in the future, it is my hope that this research will lend to further explication of urban black church's response to increased gentrification and revitalization programs that have disrupted the social fabric of neighborhoods. I am interested in how urban black churches respond to socio-demographic shifts in racially and economically transitioning neighborhoods. Many social ills affecting urban black communities instantiate black churches prioritizing the issues they address. In light of increased urbanization - which brings increased pollution, temperatures, storms/flooding events, and instability in our food supply - the black church has a significant role in securing an urban environmental future.

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