African American Megachurches and Community Empowerment: Fostering Life in Dry Places

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Introduction

I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me (Matt. 25. 36–40 *Today's New International Version*).

The African American church has been defined by the seminal work of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) as independent denominations controlled solely by Blacks that make up the heart of Black Christianity. It principally has to do with the expressions of spirituality and the religious practices of African Americans. African slaves had a culture that was richly steeped in spiritual and religious traditions and practices that they were often discouraged from observing. During that era, it was not uncommon for Blacks and Whites, in some areas of southern states, to attend church services together but because of racism, Blacks were often prevented from fully participating in church services and activities that were dominated by Whites (Moore 1991). As a result, in their search for both autonomy from White authority and the ability to practice religion as they desired, African Americans initiated their own denominations and their own houses of worship.

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Now just as then, the African American church performs a myriad of functions within the African American community (Hill 1997; Swain 2008; Williamson and Kautz 2009). It initially emerged as an “invisible institution,” an informal network among the slaves which was instrumental for numerous endeavors among which was abolitionist activity and the Underground Railroad (Moore 1991). The African American church continues to operate as a pseudo-family where congregants and non-members alike receive social support, avowal, and have the freedom to worship from a cultural perspective (Johnson and Staples 2005). Worship services are a vehicle for releasing stress, addressing disappointment from life’s challenges, and African people can be encouraged to strive for economic, social, and political betterment.

The first known formal African American church was established between 1750 and 1773 and was subsequently followed by the founding of others (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). These churches were responsible for the eventual formation of numerous African American institutions such as seminaries, Black colleges and academies, insurance companies, banks, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. By 1906, the African American church had grown to over 36,000 churches with a total membership of over 3.5 million people (Birchett 1992). It is estimated that there are now between 65,000 and 75,000 African American churches with approximately three fourths of all African Americans holding church membership (Thomas et al. 1994; Hill 1997).

Not only has the number of African American churches substantially grown but the congregational size of many of these houses of worship has also burgeoned. Now known as megachurches, because they boast memberships of 2,000 congregants or more, they are institutions that continue to be central to the African American community’s spiritual, political, social, and economic activity and the means by which Blacks can relate to their Divinity through their cultural heritage. Because of the magnitude of the number of people who attend them and their vast economic resources, African American megachurches are in a strategic position to utilize their means to help alleviate a whole host of problems faced by the African American community. Briefly, there is a milieu of activities offered to the community by these churches such as self-help and a variety of support groups like those designed to benefit those who struggle with substance abuse issues and who have HIV and AIDS, lay health advisory networks, health coaching, physical fitness programs and gyms, youth development and afterschool academic tutorial assistance, latchkey programs, mental health counseling services, pastoral counseling, fatherhood initiatives, marriage, family and bereavement counseling, food and clothing outreach, nursing home and assisted living care, and a variety of other services that provide a context for empowering the African American community. Community empowerment “refers to the central and direct involvement of people in determining their own struggles, strengths and future” (Long et al. 2006, p. 18). Further, being empowered is liberating because people then become involved in their own social construction and gain control over their own circumstances and future. The African American church, whatever the size, is the only institution outside of the family where people of African descent have full autonomy, and for that reason, it can serve and should serve as a powerful social change agent.

The impetus for the topic of this special thematic issue came from the guest editor’s lifelong experience with and involvement in the African American church. She has been exposed to divergent theological ideologies and religious practices on

her journey from being a member of a northern Pentecostal church with a small congregation of 200 to now belonging to a Baptist megachurch located in a southern state with a membership of approximately 3,000 persons. This experience has led her to ask many questions about the role of the African American megachurch in community empowerment. Among these questions are: (1) What are the socio-economic, political, and spiritual implications of African American megachurches for the Black community at the individual, family and community level; (2) What is the intersection between the gospel of self-empowerment and community development in light of all of the support that African American megachurches can and should provide; (3) What gaps exist in services, outreach, and performance of African American megachurches that ought to be filled by them in empowering its community; and (4) How might these sizeable institutions better serve those whom they were designed to assist? Those who responded to the call for manuscripts for this special theme edition have provided insight to these and many other questions.

In the first article, Jonathan L. Walton discusses and analyzes African American megachurches from a historical, racial, and ecclesiastical perspective. He examines the ethical and ideational values of these faith communities and further argues that the professional identity, culture, and theology sometimes lead to internal tensions that pose ethical challenges to their missions. Rather than approaching their work in one of the traditional ways that researchers study the African American church via focusing either on denominational studies or investigated links between religious involvement and health outcomes, in the second article, Pamela P. Martin, Tuere A. Bowles, LaTrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach, answer questions regarding the extent to which African American megachurches impede or enhance the overall well-being of the African American community. Their findings show that four theological themes, honoring the Holy Spirit, heavenly minded, Biblical principles, and social legacy relate to the social outreach efforts of the megachurches in their research.

Next, Sandra L. Barnes is concerned with how and if general theology and particularly Social Gospel influence community empowerment programs among African American megachurches. Focusing her research on 31 African American megachurches, many of whom subscribe to a Social Gospel message, she found that within her sample Social Gospel was framed to reflect social justice, servanthood, and self-help themes and further that economic development was a central theme of community empowerment programs. Cassandra Chaney and Patrick Le'Brian explore the disconnection between the African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community and the African American church. They are particularly concerned with the invisibility of this population within megachurches and the efforts that these institutions make to address this issue.

Kendra Barber addresses the utility of African American megachurches as platforms for addressing racism in a post-civil rights color-blind epoch. Giving special attention to the theology of individualism and self-empowerment that is often preached in both African American megachurches and neo-Pentecostal churches, she addresses how this type of message can foster collective racial identity which can then be instrumental to African Americans in resisting racism. The work of Amandia Speakes-Lewis explores the influence of a consumerist culture and individualistic society on the original intent of the church which was to fight for freedom and to

advocate for social justice. Couched in the empowerment perspective, Dr. Speakes-Lewis discusses how individualism and other barriers impede community empowerment. She calls for a move from prosperity preaching that focuses on external wealth to a theology that empowers and encourages congregants to take action to address large-scale social issues. Finally, Michelle Beadle-Holder examined how seven Black churches, three of which are megachurches, responded to assisting those affected with HIV and AIDS. Quilting, prayer, and practices in liberation theology emerged as the three primary approaches that were used to address the stigma and silence that are often related to how society relates to those who are affected by this disease.

It is the hope of the guest editor, and the contributors to this special thematic issue, that what has been here presented will make a positive contribution to the discussion, both nationally and internationally, regarding the power and the responsibility of the African American megachurch to make a significant and lasting impact on the spiritual, socio-economic, physical, and political well-being of African Americans and ultimately for people of African ancestry throughout the Diaspora. The needs of African people, in this country and throughout the world, are great. Homelessness, poverty, abuses of diverse kinds, physical, mental, and spiritual health issues, and so many other ills need attention and need that attention urgently. To be sure, the total responsibility of helping our community does not rest solely on the shoulders of the church but given the resources that can be made available to the African American community through African American megachurches, it is the guest editor's belief that these institutions have the wherewithal to make change not only on the individual but on the larger societal level as well, serve as beacons of hope in the wake of apathy, and perhaps most importantly, to foster community empowerment. We are ever grateful to Dr. Anthony Lemelle, Jr., Editor of the *Journal of African American Studies* for the opportunity to create this forum.

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