Looking Back, Moving Forward: How the Civil Rights Era Church Can Guide the Modern Black Church in Improving Black Student Achievement

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As the operational center of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black church fostered community, functioned as an educative space, and promoted collaborative efforts among churches. Similarly, the modern Black church has the opportunity to invest in educating, organizing, and mobilizing people within the church and the local community. By investing in and encouraging congregants and community residents to seek positions on school boards and fostering educative relationships with students, the Black church can proactively engage the socio-political arena and ensure that the community has a voice in the education of Black children. Given the pronounced history of the Black church and the education of Black citizens, this article seeks to examine the ways in which the Black church of the civil rights era can inform the practices of the modern Black church for the purposes of improving Black student achievement.

Keywords: Black church, civil rights, student achievement

INTRODUCTION

Despite the ambitious “field-leveling” objectives of the United States’ most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (n.d.), No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), current student achievement data suggest that African American students continue to fall short of the academic success of their non-African American counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2009a). This is further evidenced in the dropout rates among Blacks. The Condition of Education 2009 report found that 17% of Blacks between the ages of 16 and 24 dropped out of school during the 2007 school year (NCES, 2009b). The whys of this reality are well-known and plentiful: substandard schools, abject poverty, “broken” families, and social and political disenfranchisement, to name a few (Middleton, 2001). Effective remedies, however, appear to be sparse. Where national, state, and local education agencies’ capacity to adequately address these challenges falls short, the socio-political capacities of non-government agencies, such as the church, must begin.

The African American church, in particular, is one agent whose capacity to affect change in social and political matters has been noted throughout history. A cursory review of African American history reveals the steadfastness of the African American church in providing spiritual uplift for the downtrodden and promoting socio-political mobilization for the disenfranchised. A more thorough examination of history reveals that at no time in its history has the African American church, as an organized institution, mobilized more effectively than during the era of the Civil Rights Movement (Hawkins, 2005). While the extant body of research bespeaks the power of individual African American churches and denominations (Hawkins, 2005) successfully advocating and implementing school reform agendas, it reveals little about the collective influence of African American churches. Middleton (2001) noted that individual churches are bridging the gap, but he insisted “the considerable power of the African American church has not been harnessed to speak with a united voice and demand better schools for urban students” (p. 428). If the full power of the African American church, also referenced as the Black church, is to be truly harnessed, churches must reconstitute themselves as visible fixtures in the community, they must proactively train and educate their members to be politically engaged citizens, and they must inter-denominationally operate.
PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Although the Black church has always functioned as the most dominant institution in Black society, one might argue that the modern Black church, with its vast bastion of economic, human, and social capital, is uniquely positioned to have an unprecedented impact on the Black community. Currently, there is no other Black institution capable of boasting the economic power of the Black church, nor is there an institution in Black society whose membership numbers compare to those of the Black church. These figures, coupled with the Black church’s capacity to efficiently deploy its resources in a way that affects change, make it a unique and indispensable player in the improvement of Black student achievement. The challenge, however, is determining how to energize the Black church in a way that reconstitutes its role in the Black community. This article will examine practices of the Black church during the civil rights era and apply concepts to today’s Black church. Furthermore, the aim is to recast education, especially in terms of equity and adequacy, as a contemporary civil rights issue, investigate the Black church’s political power during the civil rights era, and identify key elements for developing a framework for how to harness the full political power of the modern Black church for improving Black student achievement.

WHAT IS THE BLACK CHURCH?

Before one examines the form and function of the Black church during the Civil Rights Movement, it is imperative to understand what is meant by Black church, examine the historical development of the “Black church,” and be sure to distinguish it from the “Negro church,” an institution with which the Black church is sometimes conflated. As Lincoln (1974) argued, both institutions are important, but there are distinguishing characteristics that deserve recognition and study. Although the Negro church, as a formal institution, can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, academic commentary on the Negro church emerged during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As Savage (2000) reminded, “the church was viewed at the beginning of the twentieth century not as a powerfully engaged political actor but rather an aged, sleeping giant squandering its potential” (p. 238).

The Negro Church

The work of scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, best exemplified this general critique. Du Bois, one might argue, suffered a schizophrenic relationship with the Negro church (Zuckerman, 2000). In an essay, “The Problem of Amusement,” by Du Bois from 1897, he detailed the dual and often contradictory functions of the Negro church as a locus of spiritual uplift and social amusement. Du Bois conceded the fact that “the Negro church is not simply an organism for the propagation of religion; it is the centre of the social, intellectual, and religious life of an organized group of individuals” (Zuckerman, 2000, p. 21). He seemed disturbed, however, by the church’s growing identity “as an amusement-giving agency.” Du Bois fully recognized the social and political potential of the Negro church, but sincerely questioned how such an institution could fulfill its purpose when “the people of this social organism demand that he shall take from the purely spiritual activities of his flock, time to minister to their amusement, diversion, and physical comfort . . .” (Zuckerman, 2000, p. 22)? He was also disturbed by the passivity he believed characterized the Negro church “and judged that its principles were well suited to the slave but unsuitable for contemporary political and social needs which in his view were being ignored by the Black Methodist and Baptist churches” (Savage, 2000, p. 237).

Woodson also believed that the Negro church was not living up to its potential. In publishing The History of the Negro Church (1921), “Woodson diagnosed the church as suffering not only from a generational divide, a class divide, and regional one but ultimately from a division over differences in ideas” regarding the church’s role in the community (Savage, 2000, p. 238). The
Negro church, as conceived by Woodson, had become a divisive institution responsible for “splitting the Black community into conservatives who embraced the old-time religion in style and doctrine, and progressives who wanted both religion and education and a more modern style of worship and theology” (p. 238). Despite his criticisms, Woodson, like Du Bois, found virtue in the Negro church and promoted its reformation rather than its dissolution.

In 1933, Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Nicholson published their groundbreaking study of the Negro church entitled, *The Negro's Church* (Mays & Nicholson, 1969). They too found the Negro church to be the sum of its virtues and vices. They cited poor education of the clergy and teachers, financial mismanagement, and social disengagement as notable shortcomings of the Negro church, but attributed a portion of these deplorable conditions, to “the failure of American Christianity in the realm of race-relations” (Mays & Nicholson, 1969, p. 279). The virtues of the Negro church; however, were attributed to the genius of the Negro church, that “something that gives it life and vitality that makes it stand out significantly above its buildings, creeds, rituals, and doctrines, something that makes it a unique institution” (p. 278). The substance of this genius Mays and Nicholson described as the Negro church’s capacity to thrive in dire economic straits, lift the spirit of the downtrodden, foster a democratic fellowship, and promote the ideological freedom of the Negro preacher.

E. Franklin Frazier (1954) built on much of the work of Du Bois, Woodson, as well as Mays and Nicholson in his text, *The Negro Church in America* by writing one of the most compelling and comprehensive historical studies of the form and function of the Black church in America. He wrote in the context of the “Negro church” chronicling its birth through the blending of West African religious beliefs and Christianity to its formal institutionalization following emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century and continued growth and legitimization during twentieth century. Frazier, similar to Du Bois and Woodson, explored the virtues and vices of the Negro church. He conceived the Negro church as a “nation within a nation... providing a structured social life in which the Negro could give expression to his deepest feeling and at the same time achieve status and find a meaningful existence” (pp. 49-50). Furthermore, Frazier believed it could be a place of refuge for Blacks in which they could remain insulated from the hostility of the White world and a potentially suffocating space that could stifle Black development.

In its positive endeavors, this nation within a nation helped Blacks empower themselves economically, educationally, and politically. They were able to build economic institutions, expand educational opportunities, and engage local political arenas. Conversely, what Frazier (1954) found stifling about the Negro church and its organizational offshoots was the authoritarian leadership style that characterizes them. He said that, “the petty tyrants in the Negro churches have their counterparts in practically all other Negro organizations” and “as a consequence, Negroses have had little education in democratic processes” (p. 90). In fact, he argued, “the Negro church and Negro religion have cast a shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroses and have been responsible for the so-called backwardness of American Negroes” (p. 90).

**The Black Church**

Several years after Frazier published his scathing indictment of the Negro church, C. Eric Lincoln (1974) wrote, “the ‘Negro church’ that Frazier wrote about no longer exists. It died an agonizing death...” (pp. 105-106). He went on to claim that, “with sadness and reluctance, trepidation and confidence, the Negro church accepted death in order to be born,” and “out of the ashes of its funeral pyre there sprang the bold, strident, self-conscious phoenix that is the contemporary Black Church” (p. 106). Although Lincoln located the birth of the Black church in mid-twentieth century America, he did not ignore the significance and contemporary influence of its antecedent, the Negro church. He asserted that, “ever since Richard Allen and his Black fellow worshippers had been forcibly ejected from Philadelphia’s St. George Methodist Church... the resulting establishment of a separate Church symbolized even at its beginning the Blackamerican’s commitment to dignity and self-determination” (p. 107). James Cone (1984), too, argued that historical church leaders such as Richard Allen, Henry Highland Garnet, Nat Turner, and Henry

McNeil Turner were inspirational figures for Blacks during the Civil Rights Movement. He asserted that, “when Blacks investigated their religious history, they were reminded that their struggle for political freedom did not begin in the 1950s and ‘60s but had roots stretching back to the days of slavery” (Cone, 1984, p. 7). Lincoln (1974) also noted; however, that while the church, as conceived by African Americans, “always stood as the symbol of freedom, even when the exigencies of the times made it a ‘Negro’ Church. . . it was never completely unanimous on the issue of whether it must not also be the instrument of freedom” (p. 108).

The socially progressive stances of Nat Turner, Richard Allen, and Henry McNeil Turner notwithstanding, Lincoln argued that, “the Negro Church qua Church traditionally courted such a conservative image as to have seldom been considered a threat to prevailing social values” (1974, p. 108). Not to completely exonerate the modern Black church from comparable shortcomings, Lincoln maintained, “the notions of meekness and suffering, of defense and self-indictment are strongly rooted in the modern Black church, though certainly not with the tenacity of former times when survival and submission were two sides of the same coin” (p. 108).

Even in inheriting some of the less virtuous elements of the Negro church, the Black church, Lincoln claimed, found itself reexamining its “responsibility as an agent of social change” (p. 108). In its renewed commitment to civic action, the Black church was confronted by waves of random violence and terror that sought to intimidate Blacks and quell the bourgeoning movement. While many churches and their members were discouraged by these aggressive scare tactics, others found in them greater motivation for civic engagement and protest. As Lincoln (1974) noted, “The rationale for quietism had been vitiated. The Black church was suddenly in a mood to hear, if not yet to follow, the urgings of a new leadership militantly committed to new and sometimes disturbing expectations of itself, the Black Church, God, and society” (p. 109).

This self-realization, coupled with a renewed sense of purpose and power, fueled the agenda of the church and in turn shaped its identity. Therefore, the phrase “the Black Church,” as used from this point forward, will refer to the collective, largely denominational body of churches comprised primarily of African American people who, through communal worship, race consciousness, and civic engagement, operate as a locus of spiritual empowerment and social agency. Similarly, the phrase “the modern Black Church” will refer to the contemporary manifestation of that same institution. While both terms are intended to signal a sense of singular, institutional form and function, they are not to suggest that the individual Black churches that comprise the institutionalized “Black Church” are monolithic in their theological doctrine or practice.

**The Black Church of the Civil Rights Era**

To avoid presenting an ahistorical argument, it is important to state that the following discussion of the Black church of the civil rights era does not assume that organized opposition to systematic oppression is unique to the Black Church of the Civil Rights Movement. To make such a claim would ignore the contributions of previously mentioned church fathers such as Nat Turner, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and Henry McNeil Turner. It would also discard the fact that

> the civil rights movement drew on . . . the social gospel to move away from the Church’s complacency of the early twentieth century and to reconnect with the social agenda that framed the work of the first generation of independent Black churches. (Pinn, 2002, p. 13)

Much of the socially progressive rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement belongs to the early church leaders, but the socio-political methods and scale of implementation were defining characteristics of the civil rights era Black church. In essence, the point is to note that the scale of civic engagement and degree to which the church mobilized during the Civil Rights Movement were at that time unprecedented.

According to Aldon Morris (1984),

the Black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement,[providing]the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen . . . skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base . . . and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle. (p. 4)

The social protest gospel of many churches during the period provided a biblical justification for opposing systematic oppression and empowered Blacks who sought to dismantle those oppressive systems. The independent and insularly nature of the Black Church cultivated these ideals and allowed the church to function autonomously

In The Black Church in America, Michael Battle (2006) echoed much of what Morris said about the Black Church’s role in the Civil Rights Movement. Battle contended, “The civil rights movement . . . was sparked by the Black Church” and laments that “this fact is not celebrated as it should be, with more credit given to the Black Church for the momentum of the civil rights movement” (p. 127). The impetus for the Black Church’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was attributed to the colorblind “White social gospelers” who “conveniently left out the problem of racism” in their campaigns to eradicate “poverty, violence, and social injustice” (Battle, 2006, p. 127). He claimed that, “African American spiritual leaders . . . were deeply troubled” by the lack of race-consciousness within social gospel rhetoric and insists that “It was because of this fact that the civil rights movement, through the Black church, came together as united witness of communal spirituality” (p. 127). Furthermore, he asserted that, “because the spirituality of the Black Church is interpersonal and communal, the civil rights movement was a natural action derived from the history, worship, and theology of the Black Church” (Battle, 2006, p. 127).

Engaging the community. According to Gadzekpo (1997), part of what made the Black church of the civil rights era unique was its commitment to “dignity and self-determination,” as well as empowering people in such a way that fostered activism (p. 101). By declaring itself the heart of the community, educating its congregants and local citizens, and working cooperatively, irrespective of denominational affiliation, the Black Church during this time became a socio-political behemoth. Pinn (2002) captured the church’s influence best. He said that “in addition to providing bodies willing to participate in direct action, disseminate information, and finance protest activities, the Black Church also provided the ideological and theological underpinning for the movement” (p. 13).

Gunnar Myrdal (1971), an author whose writings predate the Civil Rights Movement by approximately ten years, offered an insightful commentary on the necessary centrality of the church in the Black community:

The Negro church is a community center par excellence. In the South, there are few public buildings for the recreation of Negroes, except some of the schools, upon the use of which many limitations are laid. Negroes are usually too poor to build special community centers. Only in large cities does private enterprise provide halls for Negro meetings and recreation. Negro homes are almost always too small to have more than two or three guests at one time. Only the church is left, and in many ways it is well fitted to serve as a community center. It is usually located in the heart of the community it is meant to serve, often closer to most of the homes than is the school. It is owned by the Negroes themselves, and they can feel free to do what they please in it. The White man’s respect for religion gives it a freedom from intrusion that is not enjoyed even in the Negro homes . . . .In fact, the Negro church is such a good community center that it might almost be said that anyone who does not belong to a church in the rural South does not belong to the community. (p. 85)

In light of its communal centrality, Clark (1971) argued that “it was inevitable that, in addition to their escape function, Negro churches would have a direct protest role,” a reality he attributed “to the fact that the Negro church was the only institution in which the Negro was allowed that degree of autonomy and freedom from White domination which permitted even a minimal degree of organization for a sustained protest movement” (p. 144).
That the Black Church had always been required to rely on itself for survival explains its historical endurance. As Battle (2006) examined the Black Church’s integral role in local communities, he noted particularly its self-sustaining capacity. He said that

In destroyed urban neighborhoods and deserted rural ones, churches are often the only survivor institutions, the only remnants of what once was a rich fabric of shops, businesses, community organizations, clubs, clinics, schools and charities. (p. 128)

In fact, he argued that, “what these churches do when they are most effective is to recreate some of the conditions for civic community on the most basic level” (Battle, 2006, p. 128). Then, when the Black Church was successful in initiating community, it created a fragile semblance of civil community where people could learn the satisfactions of effectiveness, acceptance, and competence, even though the Black Church was obliged to create in itself the circumstances under which those satisfactions could be experienced. (p. 128)

Additionally,

The Civil Rights Movement, led by the Black Church sought not to access a set of opportunities that were already in existence, but the new creation of a civic community that could sustain basic opportunities for and relationships among people historically oppressed in America society. (Battle, 2006, p. 128)

Pinn (2002) also noted the significance of the Black Church’s participation in community engagement. He argued that

the civil rights movement required the active participation of congregations, [and consequently], members of churches created and distributed information, raised money, spread word of meetings, boycotted businesses, and marched in accordance with the vision of freedom presented by the movement’s leadership. (p. 14)

Specifically, he cited the importance of large congregational meetings and Sunday worship services in not only galvanizing church members and the local community, but also educating them. Many churches disseminated literature on political candidates and their platforms in an effort “create voting blocs that reinforced the direct action activities of the movement” (Pinn, 2002, p. 14).

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) echoed this sentiment, noting that, “Many northern Black churches continued to play a role in mobilizing Black voters and providing a forum where political candidates could address the members of the Black community” (pp. 209-210). Furthermore, “Black churches were the major points of mobilization for mass meetings and demonstrations, and Black church members fed and housed the civil rights workers from SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], CORE [Congress on Racial Equality], and other religious and secular groups” (p. 212). Similarly, Crawford and Olson (2001) discussed how during the Civil Rights Movement and Black churches were powerful political loci, as

African American clergy held rallies in Black churches, recruited marchers from Black church ranks, used their churches as communications networks, and raised funds from those in the pews, all the while inspiring the people with their social justice. (p. 76).

Preparing the community. In conjunction with its communal and political roles, the Black Church functioned as an educative space in which citizens and congregants could acquire valuable skills. Lincoln (1974) provided an example of exactly how the Black Church operated as a place of social transformation through education. In the late 1950s, Black ministers in Philadelphia took notice of high unemployment among Blacks in the city. Attributing the rampant joblessness to racial discrimination, the Black clergymen, known as the “Philadelphia Four Hundred,” coalesced into an alliance determined to bring “an end to the more blatant forms of job discrimination by the simple expedient of suggesting to their congregations that they avoid promoting the evils of discrimination by not doing business with companies who practiced it” (Lincoln, 1971, p. 121).
Furthermore, in an effort to ensure Blacks were prepared for the jobs that became available through their efforts, “the Black Church through its Opportunities Industrialization Centers . . . went on to provide Black people with the skills and training needed to fill the jobs selective patronage could open” (p. 121).

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) noted the educative function of the Black Church in the development of civic skills. They said, “Black laywomen . . . learned about running for office, campaigning, voting, and leading in the women’s conventions of their denominations, in the Sunday school and missionary conventions, and in the national network of Negro women’s clubs” (p. 210). Brown and Brown (2003), too, argued that, “the church environment was where these individuals learned how to deal with inter-group conflict, manage budgets, elect officials to church office, and hold their peers accountable” (p. 621). Having acquired the civic skill sets, Blacks were better equipped to participate in the Civil Rights Movement.

**The Modern Black Church**

Inarguably, much has changed since the Civil Rights Movement came to an end more than forty years ago. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King struck a tremendous blow to the heart of the Movement and in many ways was a bittersweet ending of a victorious era. In the absence of definitive leadership, the collaborative structure that bound the civil rights activists together fragmented into feuding factions. Disputes about new leadership and a revised socio-political agenda for Black Americans became divisive issues that further weakened an already struggling resistance effort. For many people contemporarily, the victories of the Civil Rights Movement are distant, almost forgotten memories; they represent the outcomes of an intangible legacy. For others; however, civil rights achievements of that time represent the tremendous potential of a people who overcame seemingly insurmountable odds. These individuals believe Black people are still “in the struggle,” and that implicit in those victories of old was a persistent belief that there was more to be done. This belief, one may argue, has preserved the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement in the Black Church. Accordingly, Michael Battle (2006) argued, “in recent years, Black churches have rediscovered some of the political strategies that the mainstream denominations deployed so effectively during the Civil Rights Movement,” making “the Black Church a force to be reckoned with” (p. 130).

That the Black Church is regaining its socio-political power by invoking the philosophical worldview of Civil Rights Movement has profound implications for the social and political agendas of churches. This is especially true with regard to education, if it is understood to be the premiere civil rights issue of our time. Considering its pivotal role in Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, what better institution than the Black Church to ensure Black students would gain access to equitable and adequate education? However, despite being rich in human and fiscal resources, the Black Church is virtually an inaudible voice in the current public education discourse. The keys to the Black Church making an impact on educational outcomes are repositioning itself as the heart of community, actively functioning as an educative space, and working across denominational lines.

**RESTORING THE COMMUNITY**

Similar to the Black Church of the 1960s, the modern Black Church must position itself as the cornerstone of the Black community. As Harris (1993) argued,

> the Black community . . . has become more diverse in self-interests and more socially stratified, the cultivation of communal power will be essential for the Black church if it is to maintain relevant contact with the liberation needs of Black people. (p. 109)

It must be an accessible and well-equipped institution prepared to address not only the spiritual and psychological needs of its constituents, but also their socio-political needs. The church should
be the place from which community-based education reform efforts emanate. One reason, as Pinn (2002) argued, is that “most of the Black denominations with financial resources have been involved in the development of colleges and seminaries” (p. 81). The significance of this is twofold. First, it shows that churches have both the experience and the resources to influence education. Second, it shows that churches have colleges and seminaries that depend on steady enrollments of college-ready high school graduates should incentivize Black church involvement in public school education reform. Not that the Black Church should be the only organization in the community dedicated to addressing community concerns but it is to acknowledge the repository of resources available to the church and encourage the Black Church to use those resources and reclaim its historical position dedicated to strengthening and enriching the lives of Black people.

**What Does This Mean for Black Student Achievement?**

In the context of Black student achievement, the Black Church must use its resources to mobilize the community and be a catalyst for shaping its educational agenda. Franklin (1997), in his book *Another Day’s Journey*, presented a useful, five-level framework of faith-based community activity that outlined how the Black Church can potentially engage the larger community. This framework includes: (1) basic charity; (2) sustained support; (3) social service delivery; (4) political advocacy; and (5) comprehensive community development. Out of this framework, levels three and four prove most useful. Level three—social service delivery—“involves a long-term institutional commitment to providing services such as . . . literacy skills, and job training and placement to local residents” (p. 105). The fourth level, political advocacy, “involves a congregation or coalition of faith communities in representing the needs of the least advantaged in society before government entities that have budget responsibilities, and before the media, which portrays the lives of these citizens,” the Congress of National Black Churches being an example (p. 106). Essentially, Franklin suggested that where community members go unheard, the Black church must speak on their behalf. Furthermore, the capacity of local churches to be political advocates for their own communities is important for the interdenominational efforts needed to make Black student achievement an issue of national importance.

Ultimately, this requires the Black Church to operate in such a way that cultivates communal power (Harris, 1993). Communal power, Harris contended, is

the ability to act on the behalf of one’s self-interest . . . the ability to act on behalf of building and sustaining relationships in community” and “the capacity both to produce collective consciousness . . . and to undergo change. (p. 106)

The church must engage the community in such a way that encourages dialogue about Black student achievement and foster open, two-way communication while rejecting authoritarian, unilateral power dynamics. This does not preclude the church from functioning as the vocal organ or public representative of the community; rather, it ensures that the church is receptive to the community’s input and speaks accurately on its behalf. Furthermore, a communal power network “deepens the investment of ownership of the church’s vision for social transformation” (Harris, 1993, p. 108). When people conceive of their local churches as partners in a larger communal effort to improve educational outcomes, they can better understand the value and potential outcomes of their contributions.

The extent to which the Black Church can have an impact on its community is even greater when the ecclesiological phenomenon of the modern Black megachurch is considered. These churches are often a major point of contention in the African American community, praised by some and vehemently condemned by others. As Gilkes (1998) noted, “contemporary Black megachurches have usually grown quite rapidly, attracting quite a bit of attention and, occasionally, hostility in their communities” (p. 104).
The inherently impersonal nature of the megachurch coupled with the pervasive preaching of the prosperity gospel is, for some critics, a potent elixir with socially and civically numbing properties. Pinn (2002) conceded that,

there is no doubt that these churches have the financial resources and personnel necessary to do good work with respect to socioeconomic and political issues, [but it] . . . remains to be seen if the megachurch phenomenon will enhance Black Christians’ abilities to influence broad political and economic issues that affect more than a small geographic area. (p. 137)

Pinn’s larger criticism was that ultimately, “the gospel of prosperity . . . may serve to hamper this national thrust” and that, “this prosperity thrust is much softer on controversial issues and tends to amplify individual growth over national consciousness” (p. 138). The danger lies in the fact that the prosperity gospel “easily devolves and becomes a religious cover for materiality, reading spiritual growth and material acquisition as synonymous” (Pinn, 2002, p. 139).

Criticism notwithstanding, “these megachurches are the most visible evidence of a revitalization and reorganization of Black church life that has been taking place since the late 1960s” (Gilkes, 1998, p. 105). They “incorporate and exploit the growth of education, skills, and middle-class mobility at a larger scale that is new and unprecedented” (p. 115). Additionally, the sheer size of these churches, with 3000 members at minimum, represents a collective power that many smaller community churches do not possess, a power that could readily lend itself to major educational reform efforts such as improving Black student achievement.

**EDUCATING THE COMMUNITY**

The second objective of the Black Church, and closely related to the first, should be to reconstitute itself as an educative space, not merely for spiritual matters, but also as it relates to pragmatic, or so-called real world matters. As noted earlier, one of the unique features of the Black Church during the Civil Rights Movement was its focus on educating its congregants and community members in effective resistance strategies and voting rights issues. There was a dual purpose: (a) to ensure members would be informed of their rights, and (b) to ensure members would be participative assets to the Movement. These were practical matters that helped enrich the community and improved the social and political capacities of the Church. Contemporarily, the Black Church must include in its ministries an educational component capable of addressing the student achievement issues that plague the Black community. There are a couple of strategies that will enable churches to maximize their human and fiscal resources.

The first strategy is for churches to foster a civic culture that educates citizens for political activism. According to Brown and Brown (2003), church members were more likely “to be political activists when they attend churches with strong civic culture in which activism is encouraged and members are provided with opportunities for political skill development” (p. 619). In terms of education, these churches can conduct mass meetings and lead informational sessions regarding local, state, and national educational policies as well as the legislative bodies that create these policies. These meetings and sessions would serve two purposes: (a) they would provide a thorough overview of the content in current educational policies and explain the ways in which these policies affect the students in the community, and (b) they would demystify the structure of policymaking bodies and processes and equip citizens to affect change. Similar to the politically oriented meetings churches held during the Civil Rights Movement, these meetings should delve into educational policies and expose issues affecting students and encourage citizens to get involved in ways that bring about the changes they want to see.

This change is accomplished by encouraging informed, calculated voting by exposing “attendees to valuable information about candidates and electoral issues” and actively training church congregants and community members to become actively engaged in the school reform process (Brown & Brown, 2003, p. 619). As Middleton (2001) insisted, “the collective power of the church must be directed toward . . . superintendents, district-level policy development, and participation in the formulation of reform agendas that benefit all urban students” (p. 429-430). He
urged Black clergy to exploit “outward opportunities” to ensure educational reform in their communities, such as

providing forums for candidates to present their urban education platforms, voting for candidates who support urban education reform, actively participating in school board campaigns of favorable candidates, demanding accountability for student progress, and running for school board office. (Middleton, 2001, p. 434)

Franklin (1997), too, found it imperative “that community members take advantage of the benefits of citizenship through voting and by holding public officials accountable” (p. 123). Furthermore he asserted that

as political power devolves to local communities, enablers [public theologians] should take responsibility for convening meetings with elected officials and insisting that these officials become educators, willing to give citizens the power to understand and affect discussions about public policy. (Franklin, 1997, p. 123)

Of course, these strategies presuppose, perhaps naively, that “average” church-going citizens are invested in American children’s education and that given the proper tools these citizens will be willing to engage the educational arena in ways that can make a difference. However, as noted earlier, it was by way of the church that many average Black citizens during the Civil Rights Movement developed skill sets that would catapult them into future careers as public theologians, politicians, and civil servants. It must be remembered and inspiration found in the fact that it was the Black church that provided publicly oppressed people a private space in which to grow, be lauded, and affirmed.

Another and more pragmatic strategy is for churches to establish educational initiatives and outreach programs that connect the church with students in the community, particularly those poorly performing students. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church is an example of a denomination that has made education a significant part of its public platform and charges its local churches with making educational strides in the community (Hawkins, 2005). Other Black denominations could follow suit, creating church-based programs and initiatives that could take shape in tutoring programs, mentoring partnerships, and school adoption plans (Middleton, 2001).

For example, Pinn (2002) noted that the “Metropolitan Baptist Church of Washington, DC and Apostolic Church of God in Christ of Chicago—take personal responsibility for basic school supplies and tutorial assistance” and that some AME churches “have developed private educational institutions to control the physical plant as well as the curriculum” (pp. 81-82)

The size and available resources of churches is likely to influence the type of educational outreach programs that they develop. For instance, large churches with numbers of educated professionals and college students may gravitate toward tutoring and mentoring programs that allow the church to use the intellectual and professional capacities of its congregants. Other churches, perhaps those with fewer substantial pools of resources, may choose to adopt a school and assign a small core of passionate and capable members to develop a relationship with that school. These initiatives are by no means mutually exclusive, and in fact, could function simultaneously. However, the extent to which churches can provide adequate educational improvement opportunities is strongly determined by its size, available resources, and qualified personnel (Barnes, 2004).

**INTERDENOMINATIONAL COLLABORATION**

What will also determine the Black Church’s impact on academic outcome of Black students is its willingness to create and sustain working relationships with other churches. This requires churches to work within and across denominational lines, ignoring the theological and pragmatic differences that require denominational distinctions, and agreeing to collaborate for the welfare of Black students. As Middleton (2001) found in a survey, even when “church leaders reported working together during crisis . . . they reported that they retreated to their own ‘turf’ once the
crisis was resolved," a challenge that "was perceived by 27% of the respondents to be a barrier to activism in the educational policy arena" (p. 435).

Middleton (2001) further contended, "public education in urban America will not improve for African American students until the church expands its mission and unites with other churches to become a unified institutional instrument for school reform" (p. 429). The challenge, then, is not only to find a way to rally Black churches across America in support of improved Black student achievement, but also to find a way to sustain that unity. In the history of the Civil Rights Movement there was a precedent of collective action among Black churches, although the extent to which these churches collaborated was small relative to the number of extant churches. There is evidence of modern Black churches operating collaboratively on a larger scale and outlining the importance of student achievement in newly agreed on points of action. One example of a sustained interdenominational work regarding education is Project SPIRIT, an endeavor led by "a collective of churches in . . . Oakland, Indianapolis, and Atlanta" (Pinn, 2002, p. 81). It was founded "in 1978 by Bishop John Hurst Adams of the AME Church as a way of organizing the educational activities of several major Black denominations (including AME, [Christian Methodist Episcopal] (CME), [Church of God in Christ] (COGIC), National Baptist Convention of America, and Progressive National Baptist Convention, p. 81)."

Hawkins (2005) cited two recent meetings involving diverging denominations as evidence of a philosophical shift in the Black Church. The first detailed progress among Black Baptists. She wrote:

In January 2005, an historic meeting of the four Black Baptist denominations, including the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the National Missionary Baptist Convention convened in Nashville, Tennessee to discuss the issues of commonality, rather than difference . . . The four presidents of the Black Baptist conventions signed a statement with nine points of agreed action including . . . a full commitment to public education and opposition to vouchers and charter schools. (Hawkins, 2005, p. 9)

The spirit of collective action and unity that emerged from this meeting was historic for Black Baptists, since philosophical differences and tension during the Civil Rights Movement were the impetus for the fragmentation of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. and the subsequent founding of the Progressive National Baptist Convention (Hawkins, 2005).

The second of these meetings, which also took place in 2005, was held by a grassroots organization based in Maryland called the High Impact Leadership Coalition (2010). The organization convened to discuss its newly drafted public platform, The Black Contract with America on Moral Values (Hawkins, 2005). The meeting’s attendees included ministers from a range of denominations and produced a contract whose six-prongs, among other things, called for significant education reform, particularly with regard to school choice, charter schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act (Arnold, 2005; High Impact Leadership Coalition, 2010; NCLB, 2002).

What these meetings represent is a sincere willingness among Black denominations to unify along common issues and develop interdenominational agendas that bespeak the needs of Black people, education being among those needs. What must follow, then, is the configuration of a national council dedicated solely to educational improvement, an organized, denominationally diverse body of well-qualified Black clergy who possess clear, feasible plans of action for improving Black student achievement. Such a commission would meet annually to review achievement data and assess the progress of Black student achievement and also discuss the major educational challenges each church has encountered. Furthermore, these summits would serve as formal planning sessions for developing detailed educational platforms that would guide local level church initiatives and specify annual goals. In its interdenominational structure, such a council might resemble other ecumenical organizations such as the Congress of National Black Churches (CNBC), but the purpose of the council would be more narrowly focused than that of the CNBC.
LESSONS LEARNED FOR TODAY’S BLACK CHURCH

What the modern Black church can learn from the Black church of the civil rights era is that the power to affect change lies ultimately with the masses and their willingness to work together for change. The handful of individuals celebrated as icons of the Civil Rights Movement were important to the progress Blacks made, but they were representatives of a larger collective working diligently to change its community. The modern Black church must recognize the power in its own numbers and cease relying on individuals to conjure up magical solutions for practical community problems.

From the Black church of the civil rights era, the modern Black church can also learn the importance of educating its parishioners as well as members of the community. Much of the success of the Civil Rights Movement was hinged on adequately educating and training people to participate in organized resistance so as to be assets to the movement rather than liabilities. In the same way, the modern Black church must recognize that its capacity to mobilize and institute changes will depend heavily on the knowledge and skills of its congregants.

What the modern Black church can learn from its civil rights predecessor is that the church has a responsibility to engage the problems of today in order to minimize problems tomorrow. Black churches during the civil rights era believed acquiring civil rights to be of exigent circumstances and understood that any delay or hesitation in fighting for those rights could very well compromise the future they had envisioned for themselves and generations to come. Leading the charge to end de facto segregation, the Black church never questioned whether Blacks deserved the right to vote, or whether they deserved equal access to public and private facilities. For participants in the Movement, being treated fairly and humanely was a right tethered to their existence, a nonnegotiable matter.

In the same way, the Black Church of today must recognize that access to an educational experience that is both adequate and equitable is a civil right that belongs to all children in the United States, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Moreover, the Black Church must recognize its responsibility to advocate for its children via school reforms efforts that will improve student achievement. Because the future of the Black Church depends heavily on the intellectual and social capacities of its youth, the church must find a way to ensure that its young children and adolescents are being prepared not only to be democratically minded citizens, but also communally and socially conscious church congregants.

CONCLUSION

To say that the ultimate fate of Black student achievement rests solely in the hands of the Black Church would be a gross exaggeration. Such a statement would ignore the numerous variables that influence student achievement and place on the Black Church a tremendous burden that is neither warranted nor feasibly manageable by a single institution. However, what data continue to strongly show is that many Black students are in dire need of an educational intervention, just as history shows Black Church’s capacity to affect such a change. The efforts of the Black Church during the Civil Rights Movement galvanized citizens across an entire nation to fight for truth and justice; they empowered ordinary citizens to challenge an amnesic America to remember its self-evident truths and deliver on its promises of freedom and equality. More than its effective mobilization strategies and resistance tactics, what made the civil rights era unique was the sense of the urgency that permeated the Movement, the keen understanding that today is far more valuable than yesterday or tomorrow.

In the same way, the modern Black church must recognize the urgent and exigent circumstances regarding Black student achievement and that the time for change is now. The Black Church is uniquely positioned to affect change, but it must fully accept its position in and responsibility to the Black community. To be an agent of change, the Church must be far more
than an architectural specimen in the community. Rather, it must establish itself as the primary organ of social reform in the community, reaching beyond the walls of its edifice to uplift and empower citizens who may feel disenfranchised. Furthermore, the Church must be proactive about educating people in the community, providing informational and training sessions for invested citizens and educational improvement opportunities for students in the community. Without sincere community buy-in and sustained involvement, a church-driven reform effort is likely to fail. Lastly, Black churches of all denominations must unite to form a national educational coalition or council focused solely on improving Black student outcomes. The collective efforts of such an entity would bring issues related to Black student achievement into a larger, more focused national spotlight and dramatically change the scale and efficacy of Black church-led reform efforts.

REFERENCES


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