

2015

Joyful noise: the ecclesiological and evangelistic significance of racial diversity and religious pluralism in the experiences of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on three majority-white university campuses in Greater Boston

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/16297>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

**JOYFUL NOISE:
THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL AND EVANGELISTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF
RACIAL DIVERSITY AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE EXPERIENCES
OF HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGIATE GOSPEL CHOIRS ON THREE
MAJORITY-WHITE UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES IN GREATER BOSTON**

by

THEODORE N. HICKMAN-MAYNARD

A.B., Harvard University, 2000
M.Div., Boston University School of Theology, 2003

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2015

© 2015 Copyright by
THEODORE N. HICKMAN-MAYNARD
All rights reserved

Approved by

First Reader

Bryan P. Stone, Ph.D.
E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

Second Reader

Pamela Lightsey, Ph.D.
Clinical Assistant Professor of Contextual Theology and Practice
Associate Dean for Community Life and Lifelong Learning

DEDICATION

To Bernadette

Truly, words cannot express the depth of gratitude that fills my heart when I think of all that you have sacrificed to get me through this decade-long odyssey. You are my joy, my rock, my encouragement, and my kick in the pants when I need it.

I love you so very much.

To Jeremiah and Justice

You two have been my inspiration throughout this entire program. I hope I've made you proud. I'm so sorry for all those days I spent away from you while I was writing. Thank you for helping me achieve this dream. Now I get to spend the rest of my life helping you chase yours. Daddy loves you!

To Zion

Our dissertation baby! Well, it'll be quite a while before you can read this. But I just want you to know that you were a part of this thing too. You came at just the right time. When my hope had run dry and I thought I had nothing left, you came into our lives and gave me the motivation I needed to finish the race. Thank you, little one. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not exist if not for the incredible support, advocacy, and timely provocation of my advisor, the Rev. Dr. Bryan P. Stone. Dr. Stone is, first and foremost, a master teacher; and I have had the privilege of being his student for almost 15 years as a seminarian and now doctoral student. I could not have asked for a better mentor and model of academic excellence.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to several other STH faculty. The Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey stepped in to serve as my second reader in the critical latter stages of the work and I will be forever grateful for her sacrifice and wisdom. Though he has left us for warmer winters, I must acknowledge the invaluable mentoring and theological direction I received from Rev. Dr. Dale P. Andrews (now at Vanderbilt Divinity School) during the formative stages of this project. I also thank Dr. Anjulet Tucker for making sure that the qualitative research design and research instruments passed academic muster, and for ushering me safely through the IRB process.

At the heart of this project is the field research that I conducted with the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, the Inner Strength Gospel Choir of Boston University, and the Third Day Gospel Choir of Tufts University. I am incredibly grateful to the choirs' directors—Sheldon Reid (Harvard), Herbert Jones (BU), and David Coleman (Tufts)—not just for the tremendous access they afforded me, but also for the friendship that I enjoyed with each of them long before undertaking this study. I am also very thankful to the wonderful students who allowed me to share the experience with them and who trusted me with their stories. Although I have done my best to represent these choirs

responsibly and fairly, no written words can capture the beauty and the power of the experiences these groups make possible. This entire project grew out of my conviction that the Spirit of God is at work in and through these choirs in a truly special way to which those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus ought to pay attention. Without the willing participation of these directors and students, this project would not have been possible.

Ultimately, this research project is concerned with the future and the faithfulness of the church. Thus, I think it appropriate to acknowledge the various churches that God has used to show me what genuine Christian community looks like: First Holiness Apostolic Pentecostal Church (Cambridge, MA), the Historic Charles Street A.M.E. Church (Roxbury, MA), People's A.M.E. Church (Chelsea, MA), Hope Central Church (Jamaica Plain, MA), Bethel A.M.E. Church (Lynn, MA), and that house gathering of missionaries that my parents were a part of when I was a child, simply known as “el grupo,” at whose feet I first learned how to pray. Special thanks to the church where my wife and I are currently blessed to pastor together—Bethel A.M.E. Church in Bridgeport, CT—for allowing me the space and time I needed to complete the writing.

Finally, I would like to thank all the family and friends who have offered their encouragement and assistance at various points throughout my degree program. I extend special thanks to my aunt, Joana Maynard, first of all for raising me; but also for allowing me to retreat to my old attic bedroom for weeks at a time to complete the writing. My sister, Eva Maynard, was also especially helpful during these “retreats” as my chief cheerleader and a dutiful sounding board. Again, I would like to thank my children for

being so understanding during these long absences from home. Most of all, I am grateful to my partner in marriage and ministry, the Reverend Bernadette Marie Hickman-Maynard. Nothing without you...

By the grace of God, with the support of those mentioned here and along with the many, many others who have not been mentioned, this leg of my journey is (finally!) finished. To God be the glory!

**JOYFUL NOISE: THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL AND EVANGELISTIC
SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIAL DIVERSITY AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN
THE EXPERIENCES OF HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGIATE GOSPEL
CHOIRS ON THREE MAJORITY-WHITE UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES IN
GREATER BOSTON**

(Order No.)

THEODORE N. HICKMAN-MAYNARD

Boston University School of Theology, 2015

Major Professor: Bryan P. Stone, E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism, Associate
Dean for Academic Affairs

ABSTRACT

This study offers a practical theology of evangelism for black churches in an increasingly postmodern American cultural context. As a postmodern politics of difference challenges the traditional construction of black racial identity and religious pluralism challenges the basis of Christian confessional commitment, the black church must reassess what it means to bear witness to a distinctive black Christian faith tradition. As a work in practical theology, this reflection emanates from a consideration of how these issues manifest in a concrete situation. Specifically, the dissertation investigates the practices and self-understanding of three historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) affiliated with predominantly white major research universities in the greater Boston area.

The descriptive analysis of these HBCGCs and the ecclesiological discussion that follows assume a reflexive quality whereby the research on HBCGCs contributes fresh insights regarding the nature of black Christian community within a racially diverse and religiously pluralist social context even as the praxis of HBCGCs is subjected to critique through the normative gaze of black theology. This dialogue includes voices from black postmodern cultural criticism in order to develop a black postmodern ecclesiology that preserves the distinctiveness of the black Christian tradition through the exercise of narrative discipline while embracing a reconstructed notion of communal solidarity that is strengthened by difference.

From this black postmodern ecclesiology, evangelism emerges as the ecclesial practice of extending the church's communal witness across the boundary lines between church and world through mutually critical transformative exchanges. The study brings black postmodern ecclesiology into conversation with cross-cultural missional theology and postliberal communalism to arrive at a narrativist confessional approach to evangelism that affirms the particularity of the Christian gospel while recognizing the work of the Spirit outside the church.

The descriptive analysis of HBCGCs aids in imagining the practical implications of this approach as they creatively embody aspects of the communal life of black churches, thereby providing unique extra-ecclesial spaces within which mutually critical transformative exchanges occur between those for whom the black Christian tradition is normative and those for whom it is not—risky exchanges the outcomes of which are unpredictable, yet beautiful and joyful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Research Question	1
Significance of the Study	1
Intended Audience	10
Definitions.....	12
Limitations	15
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY	16
Practical Theological Method.....	16
Qualitative Method	18
<i>Study Procedures</i>	19
<i>Data Analysis</i>	21
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW	23
Introduction.....	23
Evangelism in Black Theological Discourse	25
Ecclesiology in Black Theological Discourse	38
<i>Ecclesiological Reflection by First Generation Black Theologians</i>	38
<i>Ecclesiology in Second Generation Black Theology</i>	57
Sacred Music in the Black Christian Worship Tradition	72
CHAPTER FOUR: DESCRIPTIVE THEOLOGY	79
Introduction.....	79

The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College.....	81
<i>Communal Identity</i>	81
<i>Communal Practices</i>	83
<i>Communal Culture</i>	85
<i>Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture</i>	88
<i>Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning</i>	91
The Boston University Inner Strength Gospel Choir.....	121
<i>Communal Identity</i>	121
<i>Communal Practices</i>	124
<i>Communal Culture</i>	126
<i>Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture</i>	133
<i>Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning</i>	140
The Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir.....	160
<i>Communal Identity</i>	160
<i>Communal Practices</i>	161
<i>Communal Culture</i>	163
<i>Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture</i>	168
<i>Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning</i>	170
Summary.....	185
CHAPTER FIVE: TOWARDS A POSTMODERN BLACK ECCLESIOLOGY.....	187
Introduction.....	187
Collegiate Gospel Choirs in Theological Perspective	188

Black Postmodern Cultural Criticism Challenges Black Theology.....	196
Re-Constructing Black Ecclesiology	205
Constructive Postmodern Black Ecclesiology and HBCGCs in Conversation ..	226
CHAPTER SIX: POSTMODERN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM...	240
Introduction.....	240
Evangelistic Significance of Historically Black Collegiate Gospel Choirs	243
Religious Pluralism, the Nature of the Gospel, and the Problem of Dialogue ...	260
A Narrativist Confessional Approach to Christian Tradition in Postmodern Theology of Evangelism.....	274
Joyful Noise: Evangelism through Extra-Ecclesial Communal Witness.....	282
APPENDIX A: Demographic Information Survey.....	295
APPENDIX B: Demographic Survey Informed Consent Form	296
APPENDIX C: Individual Interview Interest Form.....	299
APPENDIX D: Informed Consent for Key Informants	301
APPENDIX E: Informed Consent for Students.....	306
APPENDIX F: Key Informant Interview Guide.....	310
APPENDIX G: Student Interview Guide	311
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	314
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	320

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Research Question

This study seeks answers to the following two questions: 1) In what ways and to what extent do historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) function as communities of black Christian faith development and public expression on predominantly white university campuses in the greater Boston area? 2) Do the communal practices of these gospel choirs, and the ways that their participants make sense of those practices, provide theoretical and practical resources for the construction of a practical theology of evangelism for black churches within postmodern North American culture?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes knowledge to the field of evangelism and the field of black practical/pastoral theology which attempt to offer guidance to the church in the United States with regard to its ongoing public witness to the gospel within an increasingly postmodern culture. Within the field of evangelism, there are three approaches that are pertinent to this study. First, I am responding to the “emerging church” movement—a growing number of ecclesial communities arising primarily out of the American evangelical church context, whose aim is to contextualize the Christian faith within postmodern North American culture. These emerging church leaders and scholars base their practical theological proposals on an account of postmodernism as an ideological

and cultural shift in attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior: from rational to experiential justifications for beliefs; from unanimity to pluralism as the basis for community; from absolutism to relativism as a predominant characteristic of ethical deliberation; from individual to communal identity formation; from dichotomous to holistic conceptions of social space; and from propositions to narrative as the form in which truth is perceived and articulated.¹ I find that the emerging church conversation is marked by a conspicuous absence of voices from within the black church. Furthermore, the dominant interpretation of postmodern culture in that discourse does not adequately account for the socio-political and economic realities that drive the development of postmodern culture, not the least of which is the white supremacist political and cultural hegemony that reigns in Western European and North American societies. A black postmodern ecclesiology and practical theology of evangelism will help fill these gaps within the emerging church conversation while benefitting from the emerging church's "post-evangelical" perspective on how to "do" church differently when approaching postmodern culture from a church tradition that is shaped by a theologically conservative biblical hermeneutic.

Complementing the emerging church's emphasis on the ideological and cultural dimensions of postmodern culture, post-liberal theologians direct their attention to the

¹ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 30-37; Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 59-61; Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17-18; and James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 16-21.

social-structural determinants of postmodern culture. In the field of evangelism, this perspective is exemplified by Bryan Stone, who critiques modern Enlightenment ideological constructions of the autonomous, rational self and the dichotomous public/private divisions of human activity because of the way that such tenets of modernity served to perpetuate the dominion of the market and the state over against the reign of God.² Stone's focus on the social-structural dimension of postmodern culture leads to a vision of evangelism that emphasizes the social, political, and economic nature of the church. Rejecting any instrumental definition of the church that might devolve into accommodation to the state or the market, Stone argues that the church is not only the vehicle of the gospel, but is itself the good news – a new social option that embodies the reign of God in and for the world. Evangelism, then, is defined broadly as the collective witness of the church's distinctive politics and economics. Stone's view of the church is very similar to the ecclesiology of early black theologians, who viewed the black church as a subversive counter-cultural community with its own distinctive epistemology and ethics grounded in the black community's encounter with the biblical story of God's reign. Stone's application of what I call a "narrative confessional" approach to ecclesiology in his proposal for evangelism will be helpful for my reflections on the practice of evangelism by black churches in the postmodern U.S. cultural context.

² Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

The discourse on evangelism in postmodern culture intersects with black ecclesiology. James Evans in his essay, “African-American Christianity and the Postmodern Condition,” argues that “African-American Christianity in its progressive mode embodies and answers to the best in the postmodern condition.”³ Evans argues that African-American Christianity is the most significant religious response to postmodernism because it accounts for its “intellectual” and “cultural” dimensions as well as its “political structures.”⁴ Evans argues that African-American Christianity’s rootedness in African traditional religions gives it an independent practical and ideological basis for its critique of the modern dualism between the individual and the community, between public and the private social spaces, between the sacred and the secular.

Given Evans’ portrayal of African-American Christian churches as quintessential postmodern religious communities, the questions arise: Why would contemporary black churches need to reevaluate their mission in response to a cultural shift that they have already embodied from their inception? And if, as Evans argues, black churches already constitute “postmodern” evangelizing communities through their collective witness as an alternative social option operating under the holistic reign of God rather than under the dominion of the state and the market, why is a reconstruction of black evangelism in light of postmodern black culture still necessary?

³ James H. Evans, “African-American Christianity and the Postmodern Condition” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no 2 (Sum 1990): 209.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

Despite the positive, apologetic tone of Evans' essay, he provides clues as to why a study of this kind is still in order. Recall that Evans reserved his praise for African-American Christianity "in its progressive mode." In a more recent and fuller treatment of the crisis in the identity and mission of black churches, Dale Andrews credits the weakening of the progressive/prophetic dimensions of African American folk religion to the impact of American individualism on both the religious and secular life of black communities.⁵ Whereas the faith identity formation of black *personhood* within black churches once served to strengthen black *peoplehood*, American individualism has disrupted black corporate identity and corporate responsibility, replacing it with the struggle for individual socioeconomic advancement.⁶ According to Andrews, the diffusion of racism as an overtly recognizable phenomenon and the fragmentation of the black community in the decades following the Civil Rights movement led to the displacement of the black church from the center of black life, greatly diminishing black churches' ability to help form black communal identity and black communal ethics.

Amidst these social-structural shifts, black theologian and church historian Gayraud Wilmore observes that a new breed of congregants in black churches are exercising theological and practical options for engaging and expressing Christian faith that further fragment black Christian identity. Wilmore states:

Today, looking down from the pulpit on a Sunday morning, you don't know who you have out there... You really don't know what people believe, if they believe

⁵ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

anything...Among the congregation we can find agnostics, practical atheists, younger members on the verge of going over to Islam, yoga practitioners and some curious about other Eastern religions, adherents of various TV and radio evangelists, younger people who are attracted only to gospel music and the entertainment of Sunday performances, people exploring radical Black theology, and folks who are proverbially at sea—drifting to and fro among a variety of operative worldviews, cults, and Christian bookstore theologians.⁷

Wilmore's description of the experimental and syncretistic faith practice of black congregants resembles the profile that emerging church leaders ascribe to the postmodern culture in which they seek to embody the Christian gospel anew. Taken together, Andrews' analysis of black churches' succumbing to American individualism and Wilmore's observation of the shift toward postmodern attitudes, values, and patterns of religious behavior among black church congregants strongly suggest that black churches have not retained their identity as proto-postmodern communities of faith and that they now face the same crisis of identity in the present postmodern context as the white churches addressed by emerging church leaders and post-liberal theologians.

In response to this identity crisis among black churches, black church leaders and practical theologians have begun to offer visions of the nature and mission of the church that are responsive to the present context.⁸ Much of the theological reconstruction of

⁷ Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes, III, and Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., eds., *Blow the Trumpet in Zion: Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 170-171.

⁸ In addition to the aforementioned texts by Carruthers et. al. and Andrews, also see Homer Ashby, Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan: A Black Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003); Yolanda Smith, "I Want to be Ready!" *Teaching Christian Education in the African American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). For a black British approach to black practical theology in the context of postmodern culture see Anthony Reddie, *Working Against the Grain: Re-imagining Black Theology in the 21st Century* (London: Equinox Pub., 2008).

black church practices proceeds from broad analyses of the social-structural shifts that are shaping the emergence of postmodern culture. However, few black practical theologians have grounded their work in descriptions and analyses of the ways that the resulting postmodern culture actually manifests itself in the values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior of younger black people. When black postmodern youth culture is examined, the subject is often the impact of hip hop music and culture on black communal identity formation.⁹ This study will contribute to black practical theology by broadening the range of social phenomena that are taken into account when depicting the impact of the postmodern cultural shift on the shaping of black identity among younger blacks. Furthermore, and more importantly for the task of theological reflection and reconstruction of black church practices, studying collegiate gospel choirs will provide a picture of this postmodern black identity formation in a context where black *Christian* identity formation is taking place.

I do not pretend that black students at elite universities in the Northeast are representative of the majority of black youth and young adults. I am clear that my research will produce a profile of a discrete slice of black cultural expression among an educationally privileged few. However, there are several reasons why the study of collegiate gospel choirs is a particularly useful starting point for practical theological reflection on black ecclesiology and the practice of evangelism by black churches in an increasingly postmodern North American context. First, as a practical concern, I chose to

⁹ One notable exception is Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

study collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white college campuses because my own experience suggests that members of these choirs are wrestling with postmodern culture and its implications for black Christian identity formation and communal ethics in a way that I was not guaranteed to find if I were to study young people in a black church setting where the pressure to align one's thoughts and behaviors to expected/traditional norms might be greater than in a university setting. In order to see how black Christians might make sense of their faith and form Christian community in postmodern ways, it is beneficial to observe their behavior in a context that, while defined and shaped by the black Christian tradition, is not directly controlled by any particular church institution.

Furthermore, historically black collegiate gospel choirs on majority white college campuses (HBCGCs), while steeped in the black Christian tradition, boast memberships that are likely to be more diverse than most black churches with regard to race, ethnicity, religion, and geographical origin. Embodied, holistic, and mutually transformational evangelism requires the establishment and nurturing of relationships between the evangelizing community and those whom the community seeks to evangelize. Given the relative homogeneity of most churches, including black churches, the opportunities for this kind of evangelism within explicitly ecclesial gatherings are few and far between. The racially and religiously diverse memberships of these gospel choirs provide unique settings within which to observe the development and flourishing of just these kinds of relationships and the practice of evangelism in a way that makes sense in the North American postmodern context. Yet, because these choirs are deeply rooted in the black Christian tradition, they offer an opportunity to witness what, if any, unique form such

evangelism will take when practiced within a *black* Christian context—a perspective that is sorely lacking in the contemporary scholarship on evangelism.

Finally, although this study is concerned with the theological implications of the communal life of collegiate gospel choirs affiliated with predominantly white institutions, the qualitative research from which the theological reflection proceeds represents a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of gospel music and the diverse contexts within which it is produced. Cheryl J. Sanders describes historically black collegiate gospel choirs as “one of the most vital ongoing institutional expressions of the ubiquitous student rebellions of the late 1960s.”¹⁰ Sanders laments that despite the importance of collegiate gospel choirs in the history of black gospel music and of black people in general, their past and present development is largely ignored by religious scholars.

In my own research, I have identified only three studies that focus on the experience of students in black collegiate gospel choirs at predominantly white colleges or universities. Of those three studies, two investigate the role that participation in collegiate gospel choirs plays in the educational success of black students at these institutions.¹¹ Both studies report that black students experience the gospel choir as a

¹⁰ Cheryl J. Sanders, “Resistance, Rebellion, and Reform: The Collegiate Gospel Choir Movement in the United States” in *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 27no. 1-2 Fall-Spr 1999-2000, 210.

¹¹ Kahan Sablo, “Lift every voice and sing: A gospel choir participation experience and the persistence of African American students at a predominantly white university” (Ed.D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2008) and DeCosta A. Dawson, Jr., “African-American gospel choirs and student attitudes at seven selected college and university campuses” (Ed.D. diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey – New Brunswick, 1986).

spiritual/religious community. However, because their concern is how this participation impacts psychological resilience and academic persistence, neither study describes the nature of the communal life of the choirs in any great depth, nor do they probe what the respondents mean when they use words like “religious” or “spiritual.” Thus, while these studies confirm my suspicion that other black college students shared my experience of the gospel choir as a community of faith development and expression, they do not provide the kind of descriptive data that would be helpful for theological reflection. The third study employed a written survey of eighty-six colleges and universities in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, which asked questions regarding the institutional composition and musical repertoire of the gospel choirs in those states.¹² No descriptive data of the experiences of the choirs’ memberships was collected. Therefore, the present study would help to fill a significant void in the academic study of historically black collegiate gospel choirs for scholars of religion, music, or higher education.

Intended Audience

The primary audience for this study is the theological academy. Specifically, the study engages five interrelated discourses: practical theology, evangelism, black theology, black cultural criticism, and black religious studies. While this study is a practical theological work, it does not seek to contribute directly to thinking about the nature of practical theology. The study does not break any new methodological ground.

¹² William Clayton Powell, “Performance and literature of African American gospel music as observed in gospel choirs of universities and four-year colleges in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 1993).

However, since each practical theologian navigates the relationship between descriptive, analytical, and normative work differently, other scholars in the field may be interested in how I weave those three tasks throughout the various movements of the project.

In terms of the study's content, I view its most significant contribution to be the union of evangelism and black theology. As the literature review will show, very little black theology addresses the practice of evangelism as its primary subject. As a result, the field of evangelism has incorporated few insights on the practice of evangelism from the perspective of the black church. Through this merging of fields, I believe that black theology will benefit from the missiological turn that the study of evangelism has taken as black theologians continue to engage in the critical task of articulating black Christian faith for the emerging generation of postmodern-thinking black young people.

Conversely, the study of evangelism will benefit from the unique perspective that black theology has on postmodern cultural analysis, the use of the concept of "tradition" in theology, and the inseparability of evangelism and social justice.

As practical theology grounds its theological construction in concrete situations, phenomena, and social contexts, it both borrows from and contributes to the cognate disciplines it employs to describe and analyze the particular area of experience under investigation. In the case of this study, my field research took the form of a comparative ethnography of three historically black collegiate gospel choirs in order to investigate the ways the communal life of each group reflects the interaction between the U.S. postmodern cultural context and the sub-cultural context of black Christianity. Thus, my research of the choirs and discussion of the larger cultural context in which they exist

contributes both raw and analytic data to the social-scientific literature on black religious practices and the critical theorization of black American culture. Although I borrow research tools from secular fields of scholarship, my work is best characterized as descriptive theology in that my normative assumptions and faith commitments are present and transparently stated throughout the ethnographic material. Still, I think that those interested in studying HBCGCs or black postmodern culture will find the descriptive and analytical work a valuable contribution to practical knowledge regarding black religious and cultural practice.

Definitions

In describing people of African descent living in the United States, the terms “black” and “African-American” are sometimes used interchangeably in popular culture and even in some academic discourses. That is not the case in this study. I use “black” as an umbrella term that refers to all persons of African descent living in the Americas. Under that umbrella of racial categorization fall any number of ethnic designations of black people living in the United States who claim other specific countries of origin—whether their own or that of other family members—as integral parts of their own identity. Examples include black Caribbean-Americans, Afro-Latino/a Americans, and black people who can trace their ancestry to a specific African nation such as Nigerian-Americans or Ghanaian-Americans.

I reserve the term “African-American” for those black people who are descended from enslaved Africans on what is now U.S. soil and who cannot or choose not to identify any other country of origin. Generally, I prefer the term “black” as an inclusive

descriptor of the people and communities I discuss in this dissertation unless I am referring to an historical period of time or a particular interaction in which making the distinction between African-Americans and other black Americans is necessary for clarity.

Understanding race as a social construction, the designation of people of African descent as “black” depends not only on biological factors such as physical features and family lineage, but on a shared cultural association that emanates from identification with a particular socio-historical narrative rooted in the social structure of white supremacy created by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus, although “black” does not refer to an ontologically or biologically determined categorization, it does have the performative function of signifying communal solidarity among various people of African descent despite their varied histories and modes of incorporation into U.S. society. This approach to understanding race as a “deep symbol” is further developed and defined in chapter five.

Some scholars that I engage in the discussion prefer the term “black Atlantic” to denote the historical and cultural commonalities of all persons of African descent living on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean as a result of the experiences and legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonization efforts across Africa. “Black Atlantic” theorists justify this larger grouping not only on the basis of the shared experience of race-based subjugation, but also due to the contemporary linkages of black people in the Americas, Western Europe, and Africa through interpersonal and mass-mediated cultural exchange. Although my focus is on black American communal

identity, my use of the term “black” includes these connotations as well. This “black Atlantic” perspective will be particularly evident in my discussion of black postmodern theory, which identifies modernity not with scientific and industrial advancement but with the global commodification of black bodies in Africa and the Americas.

Despite the influence of the concept of the “black Atlantic” on my discussion of black postmodernism, my interest is limited to how people of African descent adopt and adapt the deep symbol of black communal identification as it has developed in the United States. Insofar as African slaves navigated their experiences through the worldview and practices of their native cultures, then the term “black” seeks to invoke a distinctively African influence on what became black American culture. However, this dissertation does not seek to explicitly contribute to the contemporary Pan-African project of articulating a coherent communal ideology and political solidarity that extends to all people of African descent in the global diaspora. Yet, I acknowledge the influence of Pan-Africanism on the development of the concept of “black power,” whose promotion as a political slogan is largely responsible for the popularization of the term “black” as I employ it. In addition, Pan-African impulses explicitly influenced the initial development of one of the choirs in the research—the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College—and will therefore be addressed in that context.

Finally, the reader will notice that I do not capitalize the word “black” when referring to race or to cultural symbols and institutions such as the “Black Church” or the “Black Power movement.” I will ask the reader to interpret this choice as nothing more than aiding the readability of the text, as my frequent use of the word would make its

intermittent capitalization distracting. When quoting other authors, their usage has been retained. All other pertinent definitions are contained in the text.

Limitations

The rationale for utilizing ethnographic research method as a tool for descriptive theology is that ethnographic research results in rich, complex, and multi-textured descriptions of the culture that is created when groups of people gather together to form a distinct community. This kind of thick description provides a depth of understanding that aids the ecclesiological reflection that will follow. However, there are several limitations to the study that are inherent in the nature of qualitative research. First, because I will study only three collegiate gospel choirs, all of which reside in the Greater Boston metropolitan region, generalization of the findings to other geographical areas may not be appropriate. Second, because all of the universities are predominantly white institutions, the findings are not applicable to collegiate gospel choirs affiliated with historically black colleges and universities. Third, because the sample size of the students interviewed was intentionally limited in order to conduct the study within a manageable timeframe, the findings should not be ascribed to a larger population. The value of the research is that it provides the kind of thick description that can produce insights into the nature of the beliefs and practices of the subjects as they manifest themselves in specific and unique communities.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Practical Theological Method

The method employed in this study is heavily influenced by Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991).¹ I followed Browning's four movements of descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology fairly closely, with a few modifications. First, the four movements are not presented linearly in a fashion that corresponds to the individual chapters. For example, the literature review can be considered historical theology, but it appears before the descriptive theology. Likewise, although there is a chapter dedicated to descriptive theology, I include some description and analysis throughout the constructive theological reflection on ecclesiology and evangelism in the final two chapters as well. Finally, strategic practical theology—the moments where I bring the specific insights of descriptive, historical, and systematic theology to bear on the implications for contemporary practice—appears at various points in chapters five and six. Although this study does not employ Browning's four movements as discrete sections within the text, the categorizations served as a helpful conceptual schema that guided the critical analysis and constructive theological work presented here.

The second deviation from Browning's approach relates to his delineation between historical and systematic theology. Browning defines historical theology as “the

¹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

Christian classics,” by which he means scripture and creedal tradition. I expand this definition to include all sources through which faith is passed on from previous generations to the present. When faith is understood not as mere cognitive assent to propositional truth but as a holistic way of seeing and being in the world, then tradition consists not only of scripture and the ancient creeds but also of the entire complex of meaning-filled practices and theological thinking that shape the church’s current life of faith. I interpret the mining of these resources as “historical theology.” Similarly, I use “systematic theology” to refer not only to a body of constructive theological literature, but to the process by which I bring descriptive and historical sources into conversation with one another on the way to formulating my own theological proposals. Thus, descriptive, historical, and systematic theology are always conjoined in my theological reflection.

The subject of descriptive theology will be the communal practices of historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) affiliated with predominantly white universities in the greater Boston area, and the choir members’ interpretations of their experience in those groups. Specifically, I used an ethnographic approach to qualitative research in my study of the activities and attitudes of students in the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, the Boston University Inner Strength Gospel Choir, and the Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir. I collected the majority of the research data through in-depth, open-ended individual interviews as well as participant observation of the communal life of each choir, which involved attendance at rehearsals, performances, and auxiliary/committee meetings. This primary data will be contextualized within the

particular historical and institutional context of each respective choir, which I will ascertain through careful review of historical documents and artifacts, as well as interviews with key informants within each university whose institutional memory of the choirs' founding and development reaches further back than the undergraduate members. However, the focus of the research will be how the current members experience and interpret their experiences within the choir.

Qualitative Method

The sources for the descriptive theological movement of this study are the three aforementioned collegiate gospel choirs. Since I am interested in the way these groups function as distinct communities that serve as sub-cultures within larger institutions, I conducted an interactive qualitative research inquiry with an ethnographic design. Michael Quinn Patton explains the purpose of an ethnographic approach to qualitative research this way:

The critical assumption guiding ethnographic inquiry is that every human group that is together for a period of time will evolve a culture. Culture is that collection of behavior patterns and beliefs that constitute standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it.²

In order to produce a rich, multi-textured description of the behavior patterns and beliefs which comprise the complex, dynamic, and unique culture of each of the choirs under consideration, I employed a multi-method data collection strategy that included in-depth

² Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 68.

individual interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and investigation of static material such as documents, photographs, and historical artifacts.

Study Procedures

Ethnographic field research took place from September 2010 through March 2012. This timeframe allowed me to observe the choirs through their natural yearly cycles. I sent letters requesting permission to conduct the research to the directors and the student executive boards of the Kuumba Singers and Inner Strength Gospel Choir. As Third Day is an academic course, I only obtained permission from the instructor. After receiving the necessary permissions, entry into each field of research varied due to practical considerations. For example, The Kuumba Singers rehearse two days per week, while the other two choirs rehearse only once. Thus, I had more opportunity to visit Kuumba rehearsals. On the opposite end of the spectrum, The Third Day Gospel Choir rehearses during the workday, which meant that I had to use vacation days from work to attend, which resulted in less observational data than for the other two choirs.

In terms of direct observation, I attended eighteen Kuumba rehearsals, twelve Inner Strength rehearsals, and five Third Day rehearsals. I also attended five meetings of the “Friends and Fellowship” gatherings that precede Inner Strength rehearsals. I attended one Third Day concert, one Inner Strength concert, and two Kuumba concerts. Throughout the field research I recorded my observations through a combination of handwritten field notes taken on scene and digital voice recordings of my recollections when I returned home. The notes and recordings were then compiled into “cooked” notes soon after the initial encounter. My observation of the communal practices of the choirs

was augmented by investigation of official documents and artifacts including concert programs, sheet music collections, photographs, and paper and electronic publications.

In consultation with each director, I selected a rehearsal during which I distributed an anonymous demographic information survey that choir members completed voluntarily [Appendix A]. An informed consent form was attached to the survey so that choir members were made fully aware of the potential risks of completing the survey [Appendix B]. At that time, I also distributed a separate form asking those who were willing to participate in an individual interview to provide their first name and contact information [Appendix C]. For the Kuumba Singers and Inner Strength, I contacted potential interviewees at random and interviews were conducted based on the ability to coordinate logistics. I interviewed seven members from Kuumba and seven members from Inner Strength. Because Third Day was included in the study for comparative purposes, I exercised purposive sampling and interviewed two students who sang in both Third Day and the Kuumba Singers for multiple years. I also interviewed all three directors as key informants, as well as the academic advisor for Inner Strength.

Prior to conducting the interview, each interview subject was provided an electronic copy of the informed consent form to review before the date of the interview [Appendices D and E]. At the time of the interview, I obtained the signatures of each subject on two printed copies of the informed consent form, one of which the subject retained. All interviews were conducted at mutually agreed upon public locations on the respective campuses and lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. I used interview guides for both key informant and student interviews [Appendices F and G]. All

interviews were captured via a digital recording device for the sake of accuracy. All transcription and analysis was conducted by me alone.

Data Analysis

Michael Quinn Patton instructs qualitative researchers to strive for “empathic neutrality,” by which he means the self-conscious balancing of both the objective and subjective nature of the research process. Although qualitative research aims to observe and understand the research field as it is without imposing predetermined results, the observation itself “depends on, uses, and enhances the researcher’s direct experiences in the world and insights about those experiences.”³ Since part of what the researcher is intending to observe and understand are the thoughts and attitudes of others, then neutrality—presenting the world as it is—requires empathic subjective engagement if the researcher is to adequately “take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others.”⁴

My analysis of the data followed Patton’s explication of self-involving inductive analysis. First, I listened to the recordings of the interviews several times, making preliminary notes about repetitive phrases or themes and marking ‘turning point’ moments when the interviewee indicated that something about their participation in the HBCGC shifted, changed, or was illumined. I conducted these listening sessions between interviews. Once all of the interviews were complete, I transcribed all of the key informant interviews, both student interviews from Third Day, and four of the seven

³ Ibid., 56.

⁴ Ibid.

interviews from both the Kuumba Singers and Inner Strength. After transcribing the interviews, I began to apply codes and categories to the answers or sections of answers that corresponded to the critical themes I had identified during my listening sessions. In one sense, the process was emic in that the codes emerged from the interviews themselves. However, since I used interview guides, the application of broad categorizations was an etic process because the categories generally reflected the areas that I had asked the participants to address.

Successive rounds of coding revealed certain patterns across the spectrum of interviewees that allowed me to categorize all the interviewees into a “code matrix” that tracked each subject's perspective on seven central themes: 1) membership diversity; 2) relational/communal tension in the choir; 3) their characterization of the music; 4) their relative assent to the message in the music; 5) the choir as spiritual community; 6) their personal faith experience in college; and 7) the overall significance of the choir experience in the context of their college life. Along with my field notes, these findings helped me answer the two basic questions that drove my field research: a) What are the core practices that define the structure of the communal life of the HBCGCs? and b) What are the central narratives that provide meaning to those practices as articulated by the participants? Put a simpler way, my analysis attempted to answer: what are the participants doing and what do they think about what they are doing? As the descriptive theology will show, the answers to these simple questions were quite complex.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to establish the theological proposals that serve as the theoretical foundation for the study and, therefore, to which my theological reflection is a response. Ultimately, the study engages in the theological construction of a practical theology of evangelism for black churches in the postmodern cultural context. This theology of evangelism will contribute to what is currently a very small body of literature on evangelism within black theological discourse. The review will outline the proposals that influence my formulation including two short articles from Henry Mitchell and James Cone published in the 1970s as well as a historical survey of the black church's narrative theology of evangelism by James Stallings from the 1980s.

Because these theologies of evangelism are firmly grounded in their understandings of the nature and mission of the black church, as will be my own, I also discuss the development of ecclesiology in black theological discourse. Black constructive/systematic theologians have ceded ecclesiological discourse to a disturbing extent to historical and social scientific works on the black church. Yet, this review demonstrates that a discernable tradition of theological reflection on the black church can be traced through the first two generations of black and womanist theology. Among the first generation of black theologians, I will summarize the three 'schools' of black ecclesiology represented by James Cone, Albert Cleage, and J. Deotis Roberts. I will then show how those proposals were challenged by the womanist theology of Delores

Williams and reconciled in the systematic theology of second-generation black theologian, James Evans.

As a work in practical theology, this study begins with careful description of lived faith practice. The faith practice I have chosen to study is the performance of black Christian sacred music by historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) whose host universities are predominantly white. The premise of my inquiry is two-fold: 1) faith practices embody their generative faith traditions in a reflexive dynamic through which their theological significance both funds and is funded by the faith communities they constitute; 2) when faith practices are taken out of the communities that bear their generative traditions and relocated in a non-native context, those practices enter into a similarly reflexive encounter with the new communities and social contexts they inhabit. In the case of this study, I am interested in the degree to which the black Christian tradition that is embodied in black Christian sacred music has influenced the communal identity of the respective choirs, and the degree to which the social contexts of each choir impact or change the meaning of the music's performance. Descriptive theology makes use of social scientific tools of inquiry while acknowledging and employing its normative theological assumptions throughout the research process. My theological assumptions in this regard are derived from Melva Wilson Costen's theology of the nature and purpose of black Christian music and its significance in the shaping of black Christian worship. The summary of Melva Costen's theology of worship and music will be placed last to aid a smooth transition for the reader into the descriptive theology of chapter four.

Evangelism in Black Theological Discourse

In *The Logic of Evangelism* (1989), William Abraham declares that “one of the undeniable features of modern theology is the scant attention it has given to the topic of evangelism.”¹ Abraham observes that evangelism has traditionally been identified as the activity of proclamation and, more recently, uncritically expropriated as church growth. Abraham argues that the proclamation model ignores the variety of activities associated with evangelism in the biblical record of Jesus’ ministry and that of the early church such as healings, exorcisms, miracles, teaching/catechesis, communion, and baptism.² More dangerously, the proclamation model construes evangelism as the work of individual specialists and disconnects this work from the life and ministry of the church.³ These traits point to the fundamental problem with the proclamation model, which is that it is aimed at a vision of personal salvation from sin that is far narrower than the biblical understanding of salvation as participation in the dynamic presence of the reign of God through the power of the Spirit. Meanwhile, Abraham characterizes the church growth paradigm as “shallow and superficial” because while it refocuses evangelism’s concern from the individual to the church, it similarly bypasses the comprehensiveness of the gospel and the complexity of Christian discipleship in deference to the goal of achieving the maximum number of converts.⁴ The result is an evangelism of avarice that will

¹ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

employ any tactic or strategy of communication, marketing, and management that will succeed in increasing church membership, regardless of whether or not the internal logic of those methods coheres with the meaning of the gospel or the mission of the church.

In the twenty-five years since William Abraham made these observations the theological study of evangelism has progressed significantly, benefitting from biblical, historical, contextual, ecumenical, and cross-cultural analysis from a diverse range of scholars.⁵ Yet, Abraham's assessment of the field is still applicable to the current state of black theological discourse in which evangelism remains largely neglected as a distinct subject of sustained, critical reflection. The contemporary literature on evangelism as practiced by black churches is mostly comprised of ministry resource material that assumes church growth as the aim of evangelism and proceeds to offer practical strategies to achieve that end.⁶ Many of these "black church growth" proponents preface their approaches with seemingly obligatory references to the importance of "qualitative" or "healthy" church growth. However, they are transparently motivated by their service

⁵ See Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008). Chilcote and Warner's collection of essays reflects the diversity of approaches used to reflect on the subject of evangelism including practical, systematic, biblical, historical, contextual, and ecumenical perspectives. The representative bibliography they provide further testifies to the breadth and depth of theological engagement that evangelism has received in the last two decades.

⁶ Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III has contributed several works to this genre including *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles for Prophetic Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) and *The Empowerment Church: Speaking a New Language for Church Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) as well as an edited volume, *Growing the African American Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press). See also Lee N. June and Matthew Parker, eds., *Evangelism and Discipleship in African-American Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999); Louis R. Jones, *Evangelism in the African American Community: An Evangelism Tool for Today's Church* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2003); Donald Hilliard, Jr, *Church Growth from an African American Perspective* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006); and James F. Miller, *Go Grow Your Church!: Spiritual Leadership for African American Congregations* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

to an audience of historically black denominations whose leaders are grasping for strategies and techniques to stem the outgoing tide of declining membership rolls. The result is a set of proposals that are long on tactics and woefully short on critical consideration of the content of the gospel, the nature and mission of the church, and the cultural context black churches inhabit.

The traditional model of evangelism as proclamation appears in historical analyses of the origins of black Protestantism as Africans in the U.S. encountered American Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on revivals as the primary context for conversion.⁷ The first Great Awakening of the early 1700s exposed Africans in the U.S., both enslaved and free, to versions of British evangelicalism that converged with traditional African religious sensibilities in important ways, not the least of which were the emotional style and pneumatologically-focused content of preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.⁸ However, the key to the rapid conversion of blacks to Christianity during this period was the affirmation and liberal use by the movement of black preachers who forged a path toward their own distinct hermeneutic and homiletic tradition.⁹ This tradition has received a considerable amount of theological attention

⁷ Albert J. Raboteau, "The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism: The Meaning of Slavery" in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 91.; L.H. Welchel, Jr., *The History & Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 84.

⁸ Stacey Floyd-Thomas et. al, *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 6-7.

⁹ Rabateau, "The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism," 92-93; Welchel, *The History & Heritage of African-American Churches*, 92-115. Also see Henry H. Mitchell, "A History of Black Preaching" in *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

given the importance of black preaching in the black church's worship practice and the esteemed position of black preaching within the mainstream academy of homiletics as a whole.¹⁰ Black preaching is central to the shaping of the black church's identity and liberation ethics and, therefore, integral to the black church's communal witness.¹¹ Yet despite the ecclesiological depth that accompanies the theological exploration of black preaching, the evangelistic function of proclamation does not receive significant treatment within black homiletic scholarship. Thus, the theological underpinnings of the proclamation model of evangelism as it relates to the black Christian tradition have not been developed beyond its traditional roots in 18th century revivalism.

Amidst the paucity of critical reflection on the practice of evangelism by black churches, there are three black theologians whose contributions point black theological discourse on evangelism beyond the superficiality of church growth theory and the reductionism of the proclamation model, and are therefore foundational for this study. Among the first generation of black theologians, Henry Mitchell and James Cone published brief essays related to evangelism from a black theological perspective. Mitchell's "Towards a Black Evangelism" (1978) argues for the necessity of a theology of evangelism that reflects both the black church's African cultural and religious roots and its commitment to a biblically-centered understanding of Christian tradition.¹²

¹⁰ Dale P. Andrews, "Black Preaching Praxis" in *Black Church Studies: An Introduction*, Stacey Floyd-Thomas et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹² Henry H. Mitchell, "Towards a Black Evangelism," *Journal of Religious Thought* 35, no 1 (Spring-Summer 1978).

Although Mitchell is widely acknowledged as the definitive pioneer in formulating a black homiletics, he does not employ the proclamation model to describe the nature and purpose of evangelism. Instead, his reflections on evangelism proceed from his ecclesiological understanding of the black church as the reincarnation of African kinship structures. In the African context, religion permeated all of life. However, in its encounter with the frontier spirituality of American revivalism the black church was introduced to the notions of conversion and volitional membership. These concepts proved useful in the American context in which the black church did not enjoy symbiosis with the wider society, but existed as a counter-cultural community that “needed people who, on their own and contrary to the powers that be, had decided to believe and to maintain a family of that trust.”¹³

Based on this model of black evangelism as adoption into the church family, Mitchell makes several observations regarding the need for its renewal in black churches. As a preamble, Mitchell notes that while 18th Century revivalism was an invitation for “lost” souls to “come home” to a family to which they already belonged, white churches have since aligned evangelism with a colonizing impulse that views its subject not as a wayward relative, but as a savage in need of Western civilization.¹⁴ In the face of this debasement of the practice of evangelism, Mitchell argues that the black church should distinguish its practice of evangelism in three ways. First, the black church must reaffirm a collective ecclesial identity as the family of God and not simply a gathering of

¹³ Ibid., 61.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

individual Christians. Second, the black church must reaffirm a commitment to fulfill its mission of *behaving* like the family of God before it will be able to adopt persons into the family. Third, based on this ecclesiology, black evangelism must not seek intellectual assent to Western creeds as a sign of conversion, but a “deep and unconditional willingness to be a part of the literal family of God, with all that this may require in changed behavior and in deep and mutual commitments.”¹⁵ As a corollary, Mitchell advises that all statements of faith be based on biblical formulations rather than creedal language because of the former’s emphasis on the relational nature of the gospel as opposed to the latter’s dependence on abstracted precepts derived from arguments that occurred well after the church’s formative period. “The purpose of new Christians,” Mitchell concludes, “is not statistical and financial, nor is it to gain support for a written creed. The purpose is to help them to sense that they are children of God and to act as befits His children, living out that commitment in the context of the very family of God.”¹⁶

Mitchell’s model of evangelism centers on ecclesial ethics in that the primary means by which the black church attracts new members for adoption is through the reclamation and cultivation of its identity as a family of God through ecclesial practices such as hospitality, forgiveness, pastoral and congregational care, and speaking the truth in love. “My experience would confirm,” Mitchell states, “that there is a place for going

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

into the highways and hedges to seek folk, but it also indicates that the greatest ingatherings have come because the church was in truth the extended family of God, and the word leaked out.”¹⁷ Mitchell does not disavow traditional forms of evangelism that are derived from the proclamation model. However, Mitchell argues that his model of evangelism as incorporation into the black church family is superior to traditional evangelistic methods not only because of its cultural appropriateness and biblical fidelity, but also because of its pragmatic efficacy.

In “Evangelization and Politics: A Black Perspective” (1979) James Cone similarly begins his reflection on the practice of evangelism by insisting that evangelistic methods must cohere with the praxiological content of the gospel.¹⁸ Like Mitchell, Cone points to evangelism’s association with European and North American imperialism as evidence that the gospel has been misunderstood as pertaining only to spiritual salvation with no import for the church’s ethics on earth. Cone’s interpretation of scripture yields an eschatological vision that affirms the hope of salvation both in history and beyond it. Using the Exodus narrative and the “The Magnificat” of Mary (Luke 1:47-53) as examples, Cone asserts that throughout the biblical narrative God’s salvation is identified as “the revolutionary historical liberation for the oppressed of the land.”¹⁹ While

¹⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁸ James H. Cone, “Evangelization and Politics: A Black Perspective” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹⁹ Ibid., 538.

Mitchell proposes that a genuine adherence to an ecclesial ethics of familial love and care is the best model of black evangelism, Cone argues that “anything less than a political commitment that expresses one’s solidarity with the poor in the struggle for freedom is not Christian evangelization.”²⁰

Although Cone’s political model of evangelism seems diametrically opposed to Mitchell’s ecclesial approach, the two theological approaches both rely on an ecclesiological-centered understanding of the gospel. For Cone, the relationship between the church’s identity and the form of its evangelism is just as strong as Mitchell, as Cone states:

The church’s task is to be the embodiment of salvation that it has encountered in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Evangelism, therefore, arises from a natural ingredient inherent in the church’s being. For if the church does not spread salvation, it denies the one who makes its identity as a Christian community possible... If there is no salvation independent of the struggle for liberation in history, independent of the emancipation of people from the chains of slavery, then there can be no Christian proclamation apart from the political commitment to fight against injustice, slavery, and oppression.²¹

Like Mitchell, Cone makes a passing acknowledgment of the persistence of the proclamation model, and then proceeds to dismiss it in favor of an ecclesial practice rooted in the church’s identity as a gospel-defined community. Because the content and form of the gospel is liberation from oppression, then the church defined by that gospel must assume the work of liberating the oppressed as the fulfillment of its mission. In so doing, the church makes Christ known.

²⁰ Ibid., 539.

²¹ Ibid.

Both Mitchell and Cone argue that scriptural interpretation is necessarily contextual and that the black church's understanding of the gospel and of itself must emerge from the creative encounter between the biblical narrative and the narrative of black experience. Mitchell construes black experience primarily through the prism of the uniqueness of black American culture and its roots in African traditions of thought and practice, while Cone scrutinizes black experience from the perspective of black Americans' unique social context of racial oppression and its roots in white supremacist thought and practices. These two approaches to understanding black experience correspond to the major divide among the first generation of black theologians.²² Black political theologians focused on incorporating analyses of increasingly complex systems of oppression so as to formulate theological constructions that would provide intellectual resistance to all ideologies that buttressed those systems. Black cultural theologians criticized black political theologians for focusing too much attention on white racism and for attempting to combat white supremacist ideology using white supremacist intellectual tools. Thus, black cultural theologians attempted to correct both of these criticisms by recovering African ideological and cultural resources that could serve as the foundation for truly independent black religious thought.

One of the features of second-generation black theology is its attempt to reconcile and integrate the political and cultural approaches to black theology. The third contributor to a theology of black evangelism, James O. Stallings, fits into that

²² Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 52-53, 65-66.

reconciliation project. In *Telling the Story: Evangelism in Black Churches* (1988), Stallings presents what he terms a work in “narrative theology,” as he devotes over half of the book to a historical survey of the evangelistic activity of black churches from 1750 to 1930. Stallings draws on this history to demonstrate that the black church developed a distinctive tradition of evangelism that “took on a unique character with the blending of evangelical Christianity, the black world view, and the struggle for liberation and wholeness in a hostile environment.”²³ Stallings defines evangelism as “the activity in black churches and their mission organizations of communicating God’s saving and liberating activity among men and women; calling them into community with other Christians for freedom, growth, and wholeness.”²⁴ Stallings’ definition of evangelism resembles the proclamation model and seems, at times, to reflect some of the shortcomings of that model identified above. However, his insightful attention to the convergence of African cultural heritage and the social context of slavery in the development of the black church yields a portrait of black evangelism that, while retaining the language of proclamation, offers something qualitatively more robust.

Using the cultural approach to black experience, Stallings depicts the black church’s beginnings as the natural embodiment of African “family theology” in which “very often Christianity (as defined by Afro-Americans) became almost synonymous

²³ James O. Stallings, *Telling the Story: Evangelism in Black Churches* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988), 89-90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

with the slave community.”²⁵ Based on the African religious principle of the unity and sacredness of life, the black church did not develop a programmatic approach to evangelism, but rather an “evangelistic lifestyle; that is, a natural way of living and acting evangelistically.”²⁶ Stallings described the impact of this distinctly African communal and holistic spirituality on evangelism:

It was often in this type of setting that sinners would be converted without organized, systematic mission programs, without the necessary presence of a minister or missionary, and without the context of a formal worship service. The community at large was a family of brothers and sisters sharing common sufferings and pains and similar joys and triumphs. The power of God and the love and solidarity of this extended, communal family were the foundations for slave evangelism.²⁷

Drawing on the African practice of passing on communal identity and communal values through the oral tradition attended to by culture-bearing “griots,” the developing black Christian tradition spread through the slave community primarily through the medium of story.²⁸ Stallings depicts the task of communicating the gospel as a communal ministry that included “testimonies, preaching, public worship, prayer meetings, experience meetings, and regular Sunday worship as well as conversion stories [by which] personal evangelism was primarily done through mutual storytelling and story listening.”²⁹

Stallings also highlights the spirituals as a critical means of evangelism because of their

²⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶ Ibid., 86.

²⁷ Ibid., 56.

²⁸ Ibid., 78

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

pervasiveness in the communal life of the slave population. “The spirituals,” explains Stallings, “encompassed many of the stories of the community while at the same time expressing deep truths about the community’s story as it encountered the Christian story.”³⁰ From a cultural perspective, the “community’s story” that black slaves weaved together with the biblical story was the story of their African heritage which they continued to cultivate in the culturally free space that they created through song, prayer, dance, and testimony.

From a political perspective, the development of the black church and the practice of evangelism are very much defined by the social context of the enslavement of black people at the hands of whites. When this political version of the black community’s story encountered the biblical narrative, what emerged was a black Christian tradition that viewed socio-political liberation for the oppressed as integral to the story of God’s relationship with humanity. Stallings describes how this tradition manifested itself in the development of the black church’s ecclesiological imagination and evangelistic practice:

Black Christians very early developed a self-understanding in which they saw themselves as chosen people, believing that they were far better models of the gospel of Jesus Christ than their white counterparts. They believed that God had, through the Union Army’s victory in the Civil War, delivered Afro-American slaves from the clutches of an avaricious and brutal Pharaoh, just as was done for the ancient Hebrews.³¹

They believed that their mission consisted of the task of freeing black folks’ souls from sin and their bodies from physical, political, and social oppression, and of

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 77.

setting conditions of existence so that they could achieve their full humanity. It was a special calling from God that had been thrust upon them.³²

Notice that Stallings delineates the goal of mission into separate categories of freedom from sin and freedom from oppression. Stallings is careful to emphasize the influence of evangelicalism on black Christianity, arguing that the primary goal of black evangelism was personal salvation from sin.³³ However, Stallings' analysis of black evangelistic practice reveals that black churches and their mission agencies functioned both as incubators of personal pietistic faith and as beach-heads from which to stage tactical assaults on the institution of slavery. Both were viewed as essential components of the story of God that evangelism was tasked with spreading. Thus, Stallings asserts: "It would be incorrect to state that the black religious abolitionism was merely a form of evangelism. But I do wish to emphasize that there was an evangelistic significance to abolitionism."³⁴ Although black Christians saw salvation and liberation as distinct, they did not view them as separate.

Stallings' work is critical to the development of a black theology of evangelism. Although numerous histories of the black church have navigated this terrain in far greater detail, Stallings was the first scholar to excavate the unique theology operating in the black church's practice of evangelism that distinguishes it from white evangelical Protestants who, on the surface, appear to employ the same kinds of activities and

³² Ibid., 90.

³³ Ibid., 56.

³⁴ Ibid., 49.

institutions in their evangelistic approaches during the same time period. Furthermore, Stallings expounds and integrates the cultural and political approaches to evangelism that were only briefly suggested by Mitchell and Cone, while at the same time correcting black theology's tendency to either ignore or dismiss the critical role of the evangelical tradition in shaping the black church's identity and practice. Finally, Stallings challenges the clerical paradigm of the proclamation model of evangelism by demonstrating that the narrative evangelistic tradition of the black church represents a communal telling of a communal story.

Ecclesiology in Black Theological Discourse

Ecclesiological Reflection by First Generation Black Theologians

Writing in the early 1990s, James H. Evans, Jr. observes that black theology, for all its groundbreaking innovation in the preceding two decades, had yet to produce a comprehensive theological statement on the identity and mission of the church. Evans clarifies that the first generation of black theologians had plenty to say about the church, but that they did not address the internal doctrinal issues that typically accompany theological discourse about the church. Instead, early black theologians understood the historical distinctiveness of the black church as a given reality that they then used to substantiate their claims regarding the distinctiveness of their notions of God, Christ, humanity, ethics, and eschatology.³⁵ Thus, the pioneers of black theology generally centered their ecclesiological reflection on images or models that clarified the

³⁵ James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 119.

relationship between the black church and the world from which it was set apart. Evans identifies three images of the church as primary in early black theology: “the company of the elect,” “the nation of God,” and “the family of God.”³⁶

The model of the church as the company of the elect is typified by the early work of James Cone, in which he images black Americans as God’s chosen people because of his reading of the God of scripture as the God of the oppressed. Cone’s ecclesiology of election depends on a heavily Christocentric reading of scripture:

The Christian church is that community of people called into being by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The beginning and the end of the church’s identity is found in Jesus Christ and nowhere else. He is the subject of the church’s preaching, and he embodies in his person the meaning of its mission in the world. To ask “What is the church?” is also to ask “Who is Jesus?” for without Jesus the church has no identity.³⁷

By linking the church’s identity and mission so closely to the person and work of Jesus, Cone hopes to provide balance to what he deems as the overemphasis of the divine origins of the church in traditional ecclesiological formulations. Cone argues that classical Western theology is too preoccupied with identifying and reflecting on characteristics that define the church’s “essential” nature. This preoccupation—whether it is centered on the classical marks of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity or the Protestant reformers’ location of the church in the practices of word and sacrament—allows the church to affirm its transcendent nature with no accountability for how that

³⁶ Ibid., 128.

³⁷ James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 115.

nature is reflected in its communal practices and ethical commitments.³⁸ Cone acknowledges that the Anabaptist inclusion of obedience to the Cross of Christ as an essential mark of the church provided a corrective away from the focus on the “invisible” church toward the “visible” church as the primary subject of ecclesiology. However, Cone laments that the Anabaptist tendency toward sectarianism and withdrawal from social and political action reinforced the dichotomous treatment of the church as primarily a “spiritual” (e.g. “private”) institution.³⁹

While not denying the church’s transcendent dimension, Cone insists that a fully incarnational ecclesiology requires the church’s faithfulness to the social and political work of Jesus:

The church is that people who have been called into being by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so that they can bear witness to Jesus’ Lordship by participating with him in the struggle of freedom. This means that the primary definition of the church is not its confessional affirmations but rather its political commitment on behalf of the poor... [This commitment] places the church in the context of society and forces it to be self-critical as it seeks to realize its mission of bearing witness to God’s kingdom that is coming in and through the human struggles to liberate the poor.⁴⁰

For Cone, the reign of God that Jesus inaugurates is synonymous with the human struggle to liberate the poor. Thus, the church cannot bear witness to that reign in faithfulness to its Lord, Jesus Christ, without following him into cruciform solidarity with the poor through material political and social activism. Again, Cone grounds this affirmation in a

³⁸ Ibid., 116.

³⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 123.

reading of scripture that highlights God's liberating action on behalf of the oppressed—most definitively evidenced in the Exodus narrative and in the teaching/preaching, healing, and protest ministry of Jesus on behalf of the poor:

If Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, then the church is his servant... To be a servant of the crucified One is to be his representative in society, bearing witness (in words, actions, and suffering body) to the kingdom that Jesus revealed in his life, death, and resurrection...

The task of the church is more than preaching sermons about justice and praying for the liberation of all. The church must be the agent of justice and liberation about which it proclaims. A confessional affirmation of peace is not enough. The church must represent in its congregational life and seek to structure in society the peace about which it speaks.⁴¹

The church is the elect people of God, chosen to be servants of the Lord Jesus; its mission is to bear witness to the reign of God that Jesus reveals. Cone agrees with the Anabaptists that bearing witness involves the imperative of bringing the church's visible congregational life into conformity with God's reign of justice and peace. However, as the servant of Jesus, the church must do what Jesus did. Cone defends against his detractors who argued that Jesus' way of peaceful servanthood prohibited the confrontational and political activism Jesus promoted by noting that Jesus' model of servanthood involved active engagement in the liberation of the poor through: 1) prioritizing their wellbeing in his public proclamation of normative ethical commitment, thereby providing them hope that God privileged the poor and was working on their behalf; 2) working toward the material advancement of the sick by healing them of the physical infirmities that impeded their ability to participate in gainful economic life; and

⁴¹ Ibid., 124-125.

3) confronting the social, cultural, economic, and political structures of domination that kept the poor oppressed whether it be in the form of overturning unjust scales in the temple courts or ordering imperial tax collectors and rich business people to redistribute their wealth to the poor. For Cone, any notion of the church's mission that is based on bearing witness through servanthood must define the practices of servanthood according to those of the church's Lord. Since Jesus' servanthood involved active and often confrontational struggle against the powers and conditions of oppression in society, then the church's identity as the servant of Jesus requires that its mission include both bearing witness to the reign of God in its internal life and bearing witness through active participation in human efforts to restructure society according to God's reign.

The second model of the church that James Evans identifies in the early development of black theology is associated with Albert Cleage's black Christian nationalism. Like Cone, Cleage grounds his identification of black people as the chosen people of God in his reading of the Exodus narrative and the ministry of Jesus. "We believe in the doctrine of Black Power as a religious concept," Cleage writes, "revealed to us, as God's chosen people, in the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus."⁴² However, whereas Cone argues that the black community is akin to the nation of Israel because of their shared experience of oppression, Cleage makes a historical case for the genealogical relatedness of black people and the ancient Israelites. Based on his

⁴² Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 274.

declaration that the Israelites were *ethnically* black, Cleage makes the following argument about the church's founding:

Jesus was trying to rebuild the black nation Israel and to free it from Rome, the white oppressor. When we say the nation Israel, we are speaking of the black Jews of the Biblical period, many of whom still remain in Israel and the Arab world.⁴³

In accordance with this view of the church's identity as the reestablishment of a black nation, Cleage argues that the mission of the black church is to provide a spiritual and institutional home for the black nationalist movement.⁴⁴ To this end, Cleage jettisons any aspect of Christian teaching or black church practice that does not serve his black nationalist agenda. Among Cleage's reformations were his avoidance of the Pauline Epistles because he believed their depiction of Christ to be overly "spiritualized."⁴⁵ Cleage also forbade ecstatic worship which he deemed "an emotional safety valve" that distracted from the liberation struggle.⁴⁶

Although other black theologians such as James Cone shared Cleage's criticisms of the conservatism of some black churches with respect to their rejection of the political radicalism of black power, most black theologians exalted the black church's historic fusion of its priestly and prophetic dimensions as a model to be retrieved. Cleage, on the other hand, saw very little of redeeming value in the traditional black church and based

⁴³ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁴ Albert Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 34.

⁴⁵ Cleage, *The Black Messiah*, 4.

⁴⁶ Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, 58.

his vision on the values, structures, and practices of a secular movement. Thus, while other black theologians attempted to identify elements of black power that were internal to the black church's own tradition, Cleage's work was criticized as an attempt to co-opt the power of the black church's symbolic language in advancement of the "religion of Black Power."⁴⁷ Cleage's cultural approach to ecclesiology seems to be a forerunner of the Afrocentric school of black theology that started in the 1980s and the slave narrative theology project of the 1990s as both sought to construct black theology using black/African sources and black/African intellectual traditions.⁴⁸ However, Gayroud Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1972) is the more oft-cited antecedent and inspiration for these works.⁴⁹

Although Cleage's ecclesiology did not have a lasting impact on black theology, several aspects of his approach anticipate themes that have become critical issues in the conversation about the nature and mission of the church in the postmodern age. First, Cleage is one of the only early black theologians to recognize and respond to the black community as a post-Christendom context for the black church's ministry. J. Deotis Roberts concedes this point even as he dismisses the content of Cleage's proposal:

⁴⁷ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 24. Roberts attributes the pejorative term "religion of Black Power" to African-American religious historian and Civil Rights activist Vincent Harding.

⁴⁸ Dwight N. Hopkins gives a review of these developments in his summary of the second-generation of black theologians in *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 92-97.

⁴⁹ Gayroud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

We must take Cleage seriously, however much we may disagree with his understanding of the Bible, his theology, or his program. He somehow speaks to many blacks in a manner that few ministers do. He understands "the mood ebony" and he is deeply aware of the needs and frustrations of black people in the inner-city as few ministers are. He gets an immediate visceral approval from blacks little given to sound reflection upon the tenets of the Christian faith... It is my view that Cleage contributes little to a worthy Christian understanding of what chosenness should mean in the black experience. But this attempt to Christianize the religion of black power must be dealt with.⁵⁰

Cleage understood the ramifications of the critiques being levied against Christianity as "the white man's religion" from various corners within the black nationalist movement, most notably the Nation of Islam and their standard-bearer at the time, Malcolm X. More than any other black Christian theologian, Cleage pressed the church to consider the rise of black power as an opportunity to incarnate the gospel in truly novel ways that are indigenous to the contemporary culture. Cleage saw that if the Christian commitment of the black community could no longer be taken for granted, then the black church had to approach the black community from a missionary posture that allowed for the mutual transformation that occurs in genuine cross-cultural engagement. Just as overseas missionaries adapted the gospel to the language and culture of the foreign field, Cleage believed that Christian doctrine had to adapt to the post-Christendom black cultural context. This led Cleage to re-evaluate not only the manner in which he articulated Christian doctrine, but the very sources of authority from which he derived Christian truth. Cleage simply rejected portions of scripture or creedal tradition that did not aid him in making the Christian gospel indigenous to black power culture. Yet, while other

⁵⁰ Ibid., 25.

black theologians also tried to understand and incorporate the ideological thrust of black power, they did not follow Cleage in his espousal of black nationalism as the only construct for the church to follow in doing so.

Cleage's conviction that the black church now operated in a post-Christian mission-field environment is related to the second theme in Cleage's reflections on the black church that points to current postmodern trends, and that is his willingness to deconstruct and reconstruct the fundamental church practice of worship. While theologians such as Cone maintained the importance of preaching and song as the central acts in black Christian worship, Cleage proposed that the preparation for concrete revolutionary action be itself considered an act of worship. James Evans describes Cleage's approach to worship as emblematic of an "ecclesiology of praxis rather than one of the proclaimed Word."⁵¹ One of the characteristics of church leaders who are intentionally responding to postmodern culture is their willingness to reorient and reshape worship in ways that better serve their praxiological understanding of the mission of the church, even when doing so represents a radical shift away from traditional practices. If the Christian gospel is a way of living and being in the world, and not simply a set of ideas, then corporate action and contextual embodiment should be integral to worship. In some cases this theological impulse will lead to the recovery of ancient worship practices that involve more diverse forms of bodily expression. In other cases, it might lead to innovations in worship that emerge out of the current cultural context and missional

⁵¹ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 134.

program. Cleage represents both approaches in his emphasis on the importance of the sacraments as well as his inclusion of workshops on revolutionary protest tactics as a part of the liturgy. Since the content and character of worship is so central to the shaping of the black church's identity, a postmodern ecclesiology for black churches will benefit from Cleage's attention to shifting cultural contexts in his conception of worship as a foundational practice of the black church.

The last model that James Evans identifies in this early period of black theology is J. Deotis Roberts' conception of the church as the "family of God." Roberts picks up on the language that James Cone and Albert Cleage use to describe black people, "chosen people of God," but qualifies how that term will function in his thought by linking it with the image of the church as family:

The black theologian has a great opportunity to make constructive use of "the family" as the people of God as expressed through the Black Church. Thus we speak of the beloved community, the Black Church, as the family of God. Here we refer to the church as it ought to be. If the Black Church is true to its nature and fulfills its mission, it can be for black people a family of God.⁵²

Like Cone, Roberts' ecclesiology has a strong Christological center. Roberts describes the Christian church as a "messianic church" in that its identity and mission are extensions of the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁵³ For Roberts, the good news of Jesus Christ is found at the nexus of liberation and reconciliation. Roberts often quotes 2 Corinthians 5:19 – "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself" – in arguing that

⁵² Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 31.

⁵³ Ibid.

if black theology limits the work of Christ to liberation alone it would lead to a distortion of the true nature of Christian faith.⁵⁴

One of the areas within black theology where Roberts finds this distortion is in the way that other black theologians such as James Cone and Albert Cleage utilize the concept of "a chosen people" to describe the relationship between God and the black community. Roberts argues that if the chosenness of black people is conceived from a vantage point that is not sufficiently Christological – that is, if black theology emphasizes the election of black people without also accenting God's reconciling of all humanity through Christ – then black theology runs the risk of assuming for itself the same destructive, exclusivist, “manifest destiny” posture of white Eurocentric Christianity.⁵⁵ For Roberts, a fully biblical understanding of the notion of a chosen people must remember that the election of Israel as a "peculiar people" had as its goal not only the freedom of the Israelites, but the redemption of the world. Roberts explains:

A people chosen of God is a people who have entered into a new understanding of their mission in the world. Instead of being victims of suffering, such people transmute suffering into victory. It becomes a rod in their hands to enter into a redemptive mission among themselves and others. If they correctly understand the role of the suffering servant, they are not led to consider themselves as superior or favored people before God. They enter into a "stewardship of suffering" with the "wretched of the earth." Upon entering into a deeper understanding of how their own lives have been purged and purified by unmerited suffering, they become "a saving minority," instruments of God's salvific purpose for all humans. Only in this way may black people overcome the danger of assuming the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 21.

posture of a chosen people and at the same time fulfill the promise and purpose of a "suffering servant of God."⁵⁶

Roberts makes his case even more explicit with reference to the implications of the gospel for the church's approach to black-white relations:

My understanding of the Christian faith leads me to speak of both liberation and reconciliation as proper goals for the Christian church in general and of the Black Church in particular. I understand the church to have a center but not a circumference – and exclusiveness to be a means to universalism and not its own end. Therefore, the Black Church, in setting black people free, may make freedom possible for white people as well.⁵⁷

In his definition of reconciliation, Roberts is always careful to note that reconciliation is only possible "between equals." In other words, the goal of reconciliation between white and black Americans requires that black Americans achieve full liberation as a precondition of any rapprochement with whites.⁵⁸ Thus, Roberts would argue that his advocacy of radical, militant pursuit of revolutionary societal change on behalf of black freedom is just as vigorous as that of Cone and Cleage. Roberts is also clear that his understanding of reconciliation does not include premature integration, which Roberts views as a tool of white elites to implicate black people in the maintenance of their own subservience.⁵⁹ Still, Roberts insists that faithfulness to the gospel requires that black people, as the chosen people of God, view themselves not only as beneficiaries of Christ's liberation but also as agents of Christ's reconciliation. However, because this

⁵⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 95.

reconciliation can only be genuine reconciliation if black people have equal standing to white Americans, then black Americans must first establish their own independent bases of political power and psychosocial well-being. In this, Roberts comes close to Cleage's nationalist agenda of building independent black institutions as a means of achieving freedom in contrast to Cone's almost exclusive focus on protest politics.

In constructing his ecclesiology, Roberts chooses the image of the church as family in order to capitalize on its efficacy in the struggle for black communal survival. Because one of the effects of slavery was the disintegration of families and, by extension, the disintegration of the sense of unity among black people, Roberts considers the image of the church as family to be a critical theological resource. If the black church understands itself to be a family then it will better meet the sociological need for a concrete community that serves as an independent social, political, economic, and cultural space for the black community. Roberts states:

It is now time to include the church as the family in our own self-understanding as a people of God. In this way, the role of the Black Church as a place of worship will be expanded to include social and political action as well. In this way the secular and the sacred will meet.

The "family" is one of the few "images" that still has rich potential for communicating meaning to black people. In spite of the history of family deterioration under a racist oppression, blacks still have romantic notions concerning an ideal family. This search for a wholesome family has deep roots in our Afro-American past. Therefore, the movement that is informed by black history, black consciousness, black pride, and black power will reinforce the place of family life in the black experience. It is exceedingly wise for the black theologian to make full use of this imagery in his or her Christian theological interpretation of the black experience.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ibid., 29.

In this formulation of the black church as family, the peoplehood of the black community as a whole is of primary concern. The black church appears to be a secondary entity whose identity as family is derivative of its utility as a source of cultural unity and as an institutional base for collective social and political engagement. Although Roberts accuses Albert Cleage of instrumentalizing the church in service of a black nationalist agenda that is external to the gospel, he seems to mimic such a move in his ecclesiological construction of the church as an institutional resource.

Sensing the danger of over-emphasizing the black church's cultural, psychological, and institutional benefits, Roberts goes to great lengths to demonstrate that his ecclesiology of the church as family is grounded just as much, if not more so, in his reading of the biblical record. Roberts cites the frequent references to the church as the "household of faith" in the Pauline epistles. He also hones in on Paul's use of familial language to define the relationship between God and Christ, explaining why Paul "seizes upon 'Father' as a distinctively Christian name for God."⁶¹ This parent-child relationship that God and Jesus share is extended to the church as a consequence of God's gift of the Spirit (Romans 8:14-17) through whom Christians are adopted as children of God and joint heirs with Christ. Although Roberts does not sustain the Trinitarian implications of this rendering of the economy of salvation, he argues convincingly that the image of the church as family stands above all of the other New Testament images of the church

⁶¹ Ibid., 31

because of its connection with the primary titles that were used to describe God (“Father”) and Christ (“Son”).

As further evidence that the New Testament church was understood primarily as family, Roberts points out that the standard title that Christians used to refer to one another – *adelphos*, or “brother” – is also drawn from familial language and reflects the status of Christians as adopted children of God. Roberts argues that this linguistic observation regarding the term, *adelphos*, is key in linking the loving character of church's identity as family with the reconciling content of its mission:

Philadelphia, “brotherly love,” remains an important aspect of Christian faith and practice. Even in Black Theology, liberation must never overshadow reconciliation. The liberating Christ who is Head of the church, the family of God, is also the reconciling Christ. We are aware of the history of oppression. “Free indeed,” as promised in the gospel, we understand to mean cultural, social, economic, political, as well as spiritual freedom. To arrive at this goal we may need to withdraw for a time from institutional expressions of racism, even within the visible church. Reconciliation in the church for black people must be beyond liberation from all types of bondage, and it must be reconciliation between equals. One may work for liberation as a prophet of hate and revenge, but one may work for reconciliation only as a prophet of love.⁶²

Here Roberts returns to his central ecclesiological argument which is that any conception of the church's mission must be internal to its identity as the family of God. As the family of God, its defining characteristic is love. This affirmation is the source of Roberts’ main critique of James Cone and, to a certain extent, Albert Cleage. Each of those scholars advanced an understanding of the black church as the chosen people of God whose mission was to join God in the work of dismantling white supremacy in all its

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

economic, social, and political manifestations to the end that black people would be free. Roberts agreed with them that God's love for the oppressed required nothing less than their complete and comprehensive liberation. However, God's love requires more than the dismantling of structures and systems of oppression; it requires the dismantling of the enmity between human beings that is the very source of the oppression. God's love requires reconciliation, and it is only by God's love at work through the church that reconciliation is possible.

Roberts and Cone both view the black community as the chosen people of God and the church as that community that bears the name of Jesus Christ and derives its self-understanding and its purpose from him. For Cone, Jesus is the black church's "Lord" whom it follows into battle with the political and economic forces that oppress them. For Roberts, Jesus is the "Head" of the household of faith who calls them into loving relationship with one another and with those estranged brothers and sisters who are drawn out of their enmity by the power of the church's prophetic witness.

Roberts' ecclesiology of the church as the family of God called to be witnesses and agents of the liberating and reconciling love of Jesus Christ is a particularly useful model for understanding the dialectic tension between individual and corporate identity within Christian community. In addition to Roberts' critique of the insufficient attention that other black theologians give to the importance of the reconciliation of all humanity within the "chosen people" paradigm, Roberts also believes that their use of the notion of the black community as the people of God does not adequately connect the importance of establishing black *peoplehood* with the value of affirming individual *personhood*. In

dramatizing this point, Roberts recalls the communal dynamics that he observed among the black students at Swarthmore College while he was serving as a visiting professor there in the late 1960s:

Some black students made a revealing discovery within their own group. They became aware of the need to have sensitivity sessions within their own ranks in order to relate to one another – not merely to react to whites out of a “psychology of oppression.” They also discovered that the “cult of personality” had emerged in their group and that they desired to have the freedom of selfhood – to think and act for themselves, even with and for the group. They further discovered that they were too “ingrown,” that they were “getting on one another’s nerves,” and that they needed to relate creatively and positively to persons outside the group for their own enrichment and fulfillment. A deep understanding of “persons in communities” in the light of the Christian faith would have made all these possibilities plain.⁶³

Roberts points out that in their attempt to cultivate unity among themselves as a black community in the midst of a predominantly white University campus, the students discovered the importance of not allowing their pursuit of that unity to stifle their need for individual development and expression. There are three critical implications of Roberts’ observation for the consideration of black ecclesiology in the postmodern context. First, the focus on black communities as sites of individual development as “persons-in-communities” prevents the development of black communal identity from resting solely on a reactionary posture that sees white racism as the foundation and reason for its existence. Second, the diversity of personalities within the community is not a threat to its unity. Third, Roberts’ reference to the interpersonal tensions that naturally

⁶³ Ibid., 26.

arose within the group highlights the reality of the imperfect nature of all human communities.

This third observation regarding human imperfection leads Roberts to deliver his final critique of the prevailing use of the chosen people paradigm to describe the black church, and that is the idealized way in which scholars like Cone and Cleage image the black community and the black church. In contrast, Roberts balances his understanding of the black church as a redeeming community with an acknowledgment that the black church itself is in need of redemption:

The Black Church must address itself to internal strife and the sins of the oppressed. The Black Church must heal itself and overcome its own brokenness. It is a "sinning church" – though it is likewise sinned against. But the Black Church must be "healed" before it will be a healing church.⁶⁴

Although Roberts agrees with Cone and Cleage that the black church is God's chosen people through whom the sin of white racism will be overcome through the active struggle for black liberation, Roberts also sees the need to preserve the historic role of the black church as a refuge where black people come to heal from the brokenness caused not only by white racism but from internal divisions of the community's own making. As we shall see in a later discussion, this confession of the black church's sinful nature, along with the balancing of the notions of peoplehood and personhood, make Roberts' ecclesiology less susceptible to the harshest critiques that will be levied toward black theology by postmodern black theologians and cultural critics.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 33.

The first generation of black theologians understood the black church as a covenant community, a chosen people with a particular mission to be an agent of liberation for black people. This ecclesiological affirmation rested on their fundamental insight that the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the story of God's liberation of the oppressed, beginning with the biblical narratives of the Exodus and Jesus' preferential option for the poor and continuing to include the struggle for the freedom and full humanity of an oppressed black American community. Ultimately, the black church's mission for the liberation of the black community is also liberating for the dominant white society because the dismantling of sinful white supremacy is a necessary precursor of the white community's reconciliation with God. Although Cone, Cleage, and Roberts differ in the degree to which they prioritize a discussion of the benefits of black theology for the reconciliation of white people, they do share in the basic premise that the contextual particularity of the gospel does not negate its universal import. The black church's identity and mission is shaped by a gospel story that is for and about black people; and yet, that *black* story is significant for the entire world because it discloses a universally relevant truth about the nature and purpose of God. While these ecclesiological reflections by first generation black theologians are critiqued and refined by subsequent stages of black theology's development, this dialectic tension between particularity and universality will remain central to defining the core of a distinctively *black* ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology in Second Generation Black Theology

The second phase of black theology's development began with the challenge that the emergence of womanist theology presented to the male-dominated project.⁶⁵

Although womanist theology stands on its own as a comprehensive and distinct approach to theological discourse, it also functioned as a source of internal self-criticism for black liberation theology as many of the pioneering womanist theologians developed their proposals as direct responses to the first generation of black male theologians. While black male theologians had begun to broaden their understandings of oppression beyond race to include class in dialogue with Third-World theologians,⁶⁶ womanist theologians indicted black male theologians for their androcentric blindness to the oppression of black women within the black community and within the black church.⁶⁷ By the mid to late 1980s, black male theologians began to respond to the critique of black women scholars.⁶⁸ However, that response did not lead to any major revisions of their central constructions of the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, much of the initial development of womanist theology centers on new soteriological and Christological proposals that view the meaning of salvation and Jesus Christ from the perspective of

⁶⁵ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 87.

⁶⁶ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 157-173.

⁶⁷ Hopkins cites Jacquelyn Grant's "Black Theology and the Black Woman" as the first published critique of black women's absence in black theology, originally published in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

⁶⁸ Cone, *For My People*, 132-139.

black women's experience.⁶⁹ Of these pioneering womanist theologians, Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993) is one of the few works that extends this Christological discourse to include its ecclesiological implications in a deliberative fashion that is helpful for this study.

In her ecclesiology, Williams distinguishes between "the black church" and African-American denominational churches. For Williams, the black church resists concrete definition. However, her clearest articulation of the nature of the black church is "community essence, ideal and real as God works through it in behalf of the survival, liberation and positive, productive quality of life of suffering people."⁷⁰ Williams fleshes out her conception of the black church through a series of images:

The Black Church is invisible, but we know it when we see it: our daughters and sons rising up from death and addiction recovery and recovered; our mothers in poverty raising their children alone, with God's help, making the way out of no way and succeeding; Harriet Tubman leading hundreds of slaves to freedom; Isabel, the former African-American slave, with God's help, transforming destiny to become Sojourner Truth, affirming the close relation between God and woman; Mary McLeod Bethune's college starting on a garbage heap with a dollar and fifty cents growing into a multimillion dollar enterprise; Rosa Parks sitting down so Martin Luther King Jr. could stand up...

It has neither hands and feet nor form, we know when we feel it in our communities as neither Christianity, nor Islam, nor Judaism, nor Buddhism, nor Confucianism, nor any human made religion. Rather, it comes as God-full presence to our struggles quickening the heart, measuring the sole and bathing life with the spirit from head to toe.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 105.

⁷⁰ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 206.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

Although Williams uses the language of “invisible church,” she does not mean it in the classical Platonic sense that would suggest the black church exists only as an idealized “form” that can only be approximated in the material world. This is not a redux of Augustine’s invisible “city of God.” Instead, Williams means by “invisible” that the black church is not an institution or even a community – it is a *happening*. The term “black church” refers not to a place, or an organization, or even a group of people. It refers to the moment when “Godforce” works *through* the community on behalf of the survival, liberation, and quality of life of the oppressed.⁷² Thus, although the black church is an ideal, that ideal is made real in concrete instantiations of God’s presence/force/spirit made manifest through a rightly-ordered, rightly acting community.

Williams denounces the use of the term "black church" in black theology to refer to both the invisible black church and the visible African-American denominational churches because of the failure of the African-American denominational churches to remain faithful to the mission of the black church. Among the many sins of the African-American denominational churches, Williams includes: sexism, immoral models of male leadership, collusion between church leaders and oppressive political forces, sexual exploitation of black women by some preachers, the preaching of a spiritualized and "heaven-directed" gospel, the encouragement of homophobia by church leaders, the wasting of church financial resources on church edifices, and the failure to establish and maintain consistent and comprehensive responses to the crises of AIDS and mass

⁷² Ibid., 210.

incarceration in the black community.⁷³ However, Williams acknowledges that there are moments in the history of African-Americans when the denominational churches have acted as "effective instruments of freedom, survival and positive quality of life formation for all black people."⁷⁴ Williams describes these moments as happenings when "the Black Church emerges from the soul of community memory."⁷⁵

Williams' argument that the sharp distinction she draws between the invisible black church and the visible African-American denominational churches is not necessitated by a formal consideration of the church's essential nature, but rather by historical and social analysis of the devolution of African-American Christian communities as they abdicated their fundamentally African values of communal solidarity in favor of "white American values of individualism, capitalist economics and classism."⁷⁶ Williams understands the early development of African-American Christianity both in slavery and for a short period after the end of slavery to have been a genuine expression of the black church as it stood in solidarity with mutual aid societies and the black extended family to form a multifaceted, cooperative institutional structure for the black community. Williams describes the demise of this communal solidarity this way:

The mainline African-American denominational churches supported the adoption of these white values, and the Black Church retreated to the deep recesses of the soul of community memory. Many mutual aid societies

⁷³ Ibid., 206-209.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 210.

went out of existence or changed to organizations of lesser importance in the economic structure of the African-American denominational churches. Black people were duped into believing that economic interests could be served by a white-dominated American capitalist economy and capitalist institutions. The black extended family passed away. Black people, in their effort to be "Americanized," began to believe that the white model of the nuclear family can more adequately service the bonding and the wisdom transmitting tasks absolutely necessary for the survival of generations of black people: women, men and children.⁷⁷

It is difficult to critically evaluate Williams' historical account, since she does not provide specific time periods to which she is referring. However, I am inclined to agree with J. Deotis Roberts in his contention that the imperfection of humanity will necessarily manifest itself in human communities. Thus, I am skeptical of Williams' romantic portrayal of the early period of the development of African-American Christianity. Yet, Williams raises a powerful point regarding the relationship between the mission of the black church and its institutionality. One of the primary measurements that Williams uses to identify the black church's faithfulness to its mission is the degree to which it was willing to share institutional power within the community. When the black church prioritized its own institutional strength and sought to establish its own primacy at the center of the black community, it lost sight of its identity as the communal manifestation of God's movement on behalf of the survival, liberation, and quality of life of the oppressed. For Williams, when the African-American denominational churches began to behave in ways that were contrary to their nature and purpose, they forfeited the right to be identified as the black church.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Williams identifies two dramatic changes that must occur within the African-American denominational churches if they are to recover their identity as the black church. First, they must recover an authentic vision of black identity grounded in African and African-American history, culture, and values. Williams cautions, however, that any embrace of Afrocentrism in the churches must include a critical rejection of the sexism and homophobia that may lie therein.⁷⁸ Any use of Afrocentrism must involve the excavation of the tradition to uncover the egalitarian strands of communal African heritage. Second, if African-American denominational churches can be redeemed from their sinfulness, particularly their sins against black women, they must undergo a “thorough examination of the doctrines to which they subscribe.”⁷⁹ Williams distinguishes herself from other liberation theologians who downplay the necessity or importance of doctrinal systems. However, Williams argues for the critical development of non-Eurocentric and non-androcentric doctrine. For all of the innovation of black male liberation theologians, Williams argues that their overreliance on androcentric Christologies reflects the sexist bias not only of traditional white theology but of the biblical text itself. Williams offers the following corrective:

It seems to me that if oppressed people in the African-American denominational churches need any doctrine, they need doctrines of resistance that are taught to the people over and over again. These doctrines could be based upon the experience of African-American people in dialectical relation with the resistance stories and patterns from the Bible and from other African cultural sources. But rigorous methods of criticism must be applied to biblical stories before they can be used to validate the creation of resistance doctrine. These biblical stories must be

⁷⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 215.

"decoded" of sexism and of any tendency they might have to support racism, colorism, elitism, homophobia and Eurocentric domination of black people's minds. Any aspect of African American people's experience and African cultural sources used to shape resistance doctrine must also be "decoded" of *all* androcentric, gender, homophobic, class and color bias.

For Williams, doctrines are vital to the mission of the church because they carry the weight of ideological foundations upon which communal identity is sustained over time. The key for Williams is for African-American denominational churches to develop new doctrine that conforms to the identity and mission of the black church grounded in African values, African-American experience, and liberative readings of Christian scripture.

In *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (1992), James H. Evans, Jr. presents a theology that is representative of the second generation of black theologians who attempted to buttress the essential framework of black theology's ethical impulse by widening its analysis of the social and historical context of the black experience and deepening its reflection on the faith claims of the black church, from whose ministerial leadership and congregational life black theology had become increasingly alienated. While Evans' reflection on ecclesiology is not a direct response to Williams (as she had yet to publish the aforementioned title), he is well aware of her early work on black women's experience of surrogacy and its implications for the refocusing of Christology away from the cross toward the ministerial vision of healing and wholeness exemplified in Christ's life. Evans rejects the move as a false choice. Yet, he seems to be influenced by womanist theologians in their insistence that Christology be driven not by androcentric creedal statements or theories of atonement, ut

by how the understanding of Jesus relates to the praxis of the community he founded.⁸⁰

Immediately after a discussion of the Christological contributions of womanist and African women theologians, Evans makes this claim:

It is not that Chalcedon and Nicaea have no relevance for African-American theology, but rather that their relevance is indirect or illustrative... The early Christian community referred to its faith as "the Way." It was the way of Christ rather than either the work or the person of Christ that provided the norms for the life of the community... The community was concerned about "the way" of Christ and its demands for an interpersonal, relational, liberated, and loving witness in the world. The way of Christ means doing the work of Christ in the world, but it is more than functional. The way of Christ means emulating the person of Christ in the world, but it is more than existential. Beyond mere "being" or "doing," the way of Christ points to the praxis of faith. The essence of this Christological praxis is relationship.⁸¹

Evans sees the task of systematic theology as articulating, interpreting, and assessing the essential doctrinal affirmations of Christian faith. However, this reflection is conditioned by the context of black experience and regulated by the ethical task of liberation toward which doctrine must aim. Thus, while Evans affirms the importance of engaging creedal language, he reinterprets its content according to a biblical hermeneutic that is hewn from

⁸⁰ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 94-95. Evans discusses the following womanist and African women Christological works: Delores Williams, "Surrogacy and Atonement in Black Women's Experience" (unpublished paper); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Kelly Brown Douglas, "God Is as Christ Does: Toward a Womanist Christology," *Journal of Religious Thought* 46, no. 1 (Summer – Fall 1989); and Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Christ for African Women," *International Christian Digest* 2, no. 8 (October 1988).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

the cultural and historical context of African values and the sociopolitical context of the marginality of African-Americans.⁸²

Evans repeats this methodology as he extends his Christology of relational praxis to its logical conclusion in his doctrine of the church. Evans retrieves the ancient creedal formula for the identity of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic as well as the ancient claim that the mission of the church is symbolized in its *kerygma*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *didache*.⁸³ Evans submits the creedal categories to reinterpretation based on the relational praxis that defines the identity of the black church, a praxis that emerged from the creative encounter between the church's African heritage and the narratives of the biblical text. In describing the fundamental biblical essence of the church, Evans relies on Emil Brunner's notion of *ekklesia* as "the social form of faith," "the heart of spiritual community," and "a solidarity among persons of faith [where] the bonds are not formal or structured, but are free-flowing, other centered expressions of *agape*."⁸⁴ In order to account for the influence of the black church's African heritage, Evans borrows cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*. In his study of traditional African societies, Turner observed "a distinctive type of social bond [resulting in] the liberation from the normal social stratifications."⁸⁵ Although Brunner distinguishes

⁸² Ibid., 33.

⁸³ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 127. See Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and Consummation*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 22.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 126. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 202.

between the institution of the church and *ekklesia*, which is an ideal community that is bound up with faith in Jesus Christ in its essence, *ekklesia* manifests itself in tension with the institution of the church. Likewise, Turner's notion of *communitas* refers to an anti-structural, spiritual power that emerges in and through religious institutions and is experienced among the members of the community as a liberating force that prevents structural necessities of institutionalization from stifling the creative potentiality of individuals-in-community.

From the interplay between the African experience of *communitas* and the biblical concept of *ekklesia*, Evans derives his definition of the church as "the community of faith in the spirit of freedom." Evans fleshes out the meaning of this definition in this way:

Liberation has been central to the African-American churches self-understanding since its inception. This liberation, however, is not just the missiological thrust of the church, it is the essence of the church's identity. Liberation is not just what the church *does*; it is what the church *is*... This liberation involves the liberation of the self and the liberation of the community... The African-American church is based on the African notion of "self-in-community"... Jesus as the center of the church [and] because Jesus is the ground of human liberation, the church is centered in the project of human liberation.⁸⁶

In affirming the centrality of liberation to the identity and mission of the church, Evans maintains the thematic thrust of first generation black theology. Evans also maintains the dual-parentage of black theology's proclamation of liberation as the content of faith: the black church experience of having been birthed in the context of a people seeking freedom from slavery and the centrality of liberation in the person and work of Jesus.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 135.

Evans goes beyond the first generation of black theologians by synthesizing what were once considered to be competing understandings of liberation into one multidimensional definition that incorporates physical, spiritual, and cultural liberation.⁸⁷ By physical liberation, Evans refers to the freedom of actual bodies from the bondage of slavery, segregation, and all social structures of domination and subordination. This form of liberation corresponds to the political and economic freedom sought by James Cone. Spiritual liberation refers not only to the freedom from personal sin associated with black evangelical faith, but also the sense of empowerment, self-confidence, self-determination, and self-love that Delores Williams identified as central to black women's spirituality. The third dimension, cultural liberation, seeks the freedom from negative images, symbols, and stereotypes that link whiteness with good and blackness with bad. This freedom requires the acquisition, development, and perpetuation of a counter-hegemonic color consciousness that inscribes blackness with beauty. While this notion of cultural liberation does not assume black nationalism's desire to build and sustain independent black social and political institutions, it does borrow the impulses of that movement in creating independent black cultural institutions and controlling independent means of black cultural production. Finally, this multidimensional understanding of liberation retains J. Deotis Roberts' appropriation of the African anthropological view of individuals as persons-in-community. In this way, the liberation of the community does not supersede or seek to abridge the liberation and flourishing of the individual; nor do

⁸⁷ Ibid., 16-18.

the individual aspirations of persons-in-community threaten or weaken the unity and collective strivings of the community.

With this understanding of the nature and mission of the church in mind, Evans returns to the work of reinterpreting the ancient marks and symbols of classical ecclesiological formulations. When viewed through the lens of liberation, the church's unity does not stand for a forced or artificial consensus. Rather its unity points to the centrality of Christ as the content of the church's *kerygma* – the word around which the church is gathered and without which the church has no reason for its existence.⁸⁸ When liberation is understood not only as the church's identity but as its mission, then holiness does not devolve into ascetic withdrawal, pursuit of superhuman perfection, or surrender to an exclusively otherworldly disposition. Rather, holiness represents the church's commitment to resist toleration or complicity in human oppression – a commitment that defines the *koinonia* of the community as one of solidarity that renders all stratifications of secondary importance.⁸⁹ Catholicity in this view does not tend toward imperialism, nor does it define universalism as an abstraction that obscures the particulars of diverse human experiences. Instead, catholicity refers fundamentally to the all-embracing nature of God's presence and God's love which impels the church to embrace the world in service (*diakonia*) by participating in God's liberating work on behalf of the oppressed.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 137.

Finally, tradition is not infallible church teaching, but rather it is "the record of the struggle of the church to be faithful to its calling."⁹¹ Recognizing that the church's tradition includes the sins of sexism, racism, and classism, the church must struggle in every age to recover the truth of the gospel that guides its preaching and praxis. In this view, the apostolicity of the church refers to the succession of its strivings toward faithfulness and *didache* encompasses the entirety of the church's intentional formation toward faithfulness through the search for wisdom and truth.⁹²

As we consider Williams and Evans as representatives of the second generation of black theology, several aspects of their ecclesiological reflections point in the direction of a postmodern ecclesiology for black churches. First, black theology offers the epistemological innovation of grounding normativity in the dialectic tension between black experience (inclusively understood) and the biblical text. By doing so, black theology loosened the grip that classical notions of church tradition held on ecclesiological reflection. As we see in Evans' systematic theology, black ecclesiology does not dismiss creedal reflection altogether; but, it significantly relativizes the normative power of ancient dogma to set limits on the range of possibilities that ecclesiology can consider when conceiving of the church's identity and mission.

Second, black theology firmly establishes that the ethical implications of ecclesiological formulations must not be considered as a subsequent matter to more fundamental and formal discussions of the church's nature and mission. No longer can

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 137-138.

ecclesiology hide the church's sinfulness behind the veil of idealized abstractions of the church's divine "essence." Even when womanist theology reintroduces the notion of the "invisible" black church, it does so not as a way of "spiritualizing" mission, but rather as a moral corrective to draw the church into greater concrete faithfulness to its mission. In that sense, womanist theology uses the language of "invisibility" not to denote ontological reality, but as a rhetorical trope to signify a rupture between the church's identity and its ethical mission that desperately needs repair.

Third, by internalizing the gender critique of womanist theology, black ecclesiology strengthens the universality of its conception of mission by developing an analytical framework of the matrix of oppression that impacts all of humanity. This development affirms the catholicity of the church not by its imperialistic drive to absorb the world into itself, but by its participation in God's mission of justice and peace through the diverse struggles against oppression that exist in every corner of the world. Womanist theology also intersects with J. Deotis Roberts' more self-critical and interpersonal understandings of black Christian community in ensuring that black ecclesiology balances communal solidarity with the importance of individual fulfillment and balances the need to recover and sustain communal pride with the imperative to confess communal sinfulness.

In summary, the second generation of black and womanist theologians retained the basic building blocks of the ecclesiology articulated by early black theologians, while expanding the structural footprint to incorporate broader understandings of black experience. Through womanist theology, black experience moves from androcentrism to

a recognition and appreciation for the unique experiences of black women. In so doing, black theology advances its contextual analysis of oppression, which propels the mission of the black church beyond a concern for racial oppression towards a view of liberation for all oppressed people. Reflexively, this expansion of the church's mission influences the black church's identity. Along with maintaining black community, the black church understands itself as black-community-in-relationship to other oppressed communities. These ecclesiological affirmations reflect the growth of black theology's epistemological foundation from a prioritization of subjectivity to an emphasis on inter-subjectivity. As James Cone puts it:

Every theology ought to move beyond its particularity to the concrete experience of others...In our efforts to accent our particularities, we must be careful not to limit God to them or to remain enclosed in them ourselves...We must, then, bear witness to God's creation of a new humanity by moving beyond ourselves to our neighbors for the building of community defined by love, justice, and peace.⁹³

While the black ecclesiology articulated by first and second generation theologians remains vulnerable to critique from a black postmodern perspective (as will be discussed in chapter five), this review of the relevant theological literature demonstrates that black theology's innovative conceptions of inter-subjective epistemology and ethically-defined ecclesial identity contain ideological tools that will be useful in constructing a confessionally faithful and contextually responsive postmodern ecclesiology.

⁹³ Cone, *For My People*, 173-174.

Sacred Music in the Black Christian Worship Tradition

The main analytical question that guided the field research for this study was: “What happens to a practice when it is taken out of its original communal habitat?” As I considered the data in light of this question, the theological foundation for my descriptive theological analysis was Melva Wilson Costen’s theology of black Christian worship and black sacred music. In her text, *In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship* (2004), Costen provides a compelling theological analysis of the music of black Christian worship from its African cultural roots to the diversity of genres and styles currently in use in black churches. In her discussion of gospel music, Costen argues that because of the way the music deliberately intertwined the sacred and the secular in both style and content, “it would be expected that black gospel would find a home both in and outside of the liturgical space of black folks.”⁹⁴ Costen goes on to describe the impact that gospel music has on its producers and its hearers:

Gospel music has a magnetic power to draw people in. There is an attraction to the musical sounds and rhythms, and the personalized message draws listeners into the story. The vocal and physical delivery of the singers helps you to hear and understand that you still belong to someone despite your status in life. It is the simplicity of the phrases and repetition of words and rhythmical devices. It is the depth of feeling that is invoked with each musical phrase, the memorable lines that one can recall long after the music stops. It is all of these things and more that provides a magnetic appeal of gospel music.⁹⁵

The gospel genre, interactively with other black folk music genres – such as blues, jazz, and spiritual – allows performers and congregations different dimensions of freedom: freedom to improvise, re-create, and

⁹⁴ Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 75.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

personalize without distorting the symbolic unity of the community, and the freedom to react to the artistic embodiment of struggles and fulfillment.⁹⁶

Although Costen's analysis focuses on the journey of gospel music from the black church to the commercial music industry and the concert stage, her reflections on the ability of gospel music to carry the creative power of black Christian spirituality to those who do not share its racial or religious heritage resonate with the dynamics apparent in the role that historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) play on their predominantly white campuses.

Yet, despite Costen's affirmation that music is "imbued by God with the power to communicate on different levels and to transcend cultures and religious traditions,"⁹⁷ she is deeply suspicious of the ability of a practice intended for worship to maintain its integrity if separated for too long from the lifeblood of the worshipping community. Costen warns of the dangers associated with making a home for black sacred music outside of its liturgical *habitus*:

While affirming that music which emanates from the soul of African-American people, expressing their current situation or *Sitz im Leben*, one must also consider the counter effects of having music released to communities outside of its existential situation of origin. This marvelous creation and concept of good news and soulful songs continues to have a powerful influence on young and restless seekers as they are driven to high moments and encounters with the Almighty. There are some who move from these encounters to acts of ministry – seeking justice, loving kindly, and walking humbly. And then there are those who sing and move

⁹⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 182.

to the slow or driving rhythms of gospel songs who have no idea of their initial intent as good news.⁹⁸

Costen allows for the possibility that the performance of black sacred music can produce an authentic encounter with God, even in nontraditional settings. However, she cautions against conflating the music's popularity with its effectiveness as ministry. "By definition," Costen explains, "black gospel music is both a *genre* (song form) and a *style* of performance, embodying the soulful expressions of the history of black people in and out of bondage and looking with joy to the future."⁹⁹ Enjoyment of black sacred songs can lead to a deep, transformative experience with God through the witness of the black Christian tradition; or, it may reflect nothing more than a superficial appreciation of the music's aesthetic appeal. The determining factor between the two outcomes is the degree to which the music maintains the unity of its character as both "good news" and "soulful song." The loss of either characteristic disrupts the integrity of the music as a worship practice and degrades its ability to faithfully embody black Christian identity.

Costen articulates what makes African-American Christian worship a distinctive faith tradition within the context of North American Christianity in her seminal work, *African American Christian Worship* (1993). Costen's theology of African-American worship seeks a balance between an acknowledgment of the diversity within the black Christian tradition and a recognition of "the reality of a common historical taproot...[and

⁹⁸ Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth: the Music of African American Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 74.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

the] nurturing it continues to provide Africans in the Diaspora."¹⁰⁰ Costen is careful to delineate the denominational differences that exist in the worship traditions of various black churches. However, she also notes that denominational differences are not as influential in distinguishing black churches from one another because of the extensive ecumenism practiced among black churches from their inception. More fundamentally, Costen argues that as various African-American communities engaged in the process of appropriating Judeo-Christian religion as it had been mediated through the Western/Euro-American churches, the folk religion they developed was rooted in the common cultural ground of African worldviews and practices. Among the core beliefs that Costen identifies as common to the African heritage of black churches are 1) a holistic cosmology that rejects the dichotomous separation of the sacred and secular, and sees all aspects of life as dynamically related and reflective of the presence and activity of God; and 2) a communal ontology that understands the meaning and purpose of human existence as thoroughly relational and expressed through the mutual interdependence, love, and solidarity of kinship.¹⁰¹

In 1986, Costen organized the first scholarly consultations on the African-American liturgical tradition held at the Interdenominational Theological Center. At this first meeting and at subsequent consultations, an ecumenical pattern of African American Christian worship emerged that included acts signifying God's divine initiative (call);

¹⁰⁰ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4-10.

fellowship (gathering); adoration and praise to God (personal testimonies); penitence (prayer); hearing and receiving the word (illumination); renewal, self-offering, and dedication; and service in the world (mission).¹⁰² Although this pattern is similar to some of the Euro-American Christian churches that introduced African slaves to the gospel, the stylistic character of the worship experience resembles the African religious practices that served as the cultural base for African-American folk religion. As Costen follows the influence of this African heritage on the development of a distinctly African American worship tradition, she identifies three elements of the worship of black churches that are “identifiable as uniquely African American: music (vocal and instrumental), preaching, and prayer.”¹⁰³ Of these three, Costen asserts that the “musical propensity of African Americans continues as perhaps the most visible conveyor of spirituality.”¹⁰⁴

As powerful a conveyor of spirituality as black Christian music may be, however, it mediates this spirituality in the context of intentional relational communities called churches. Of the importance of community to the expression of true Christian worship, Costen writes:

The experience of beloved community is central to worship. The extent to which community togetherness happens depends on whether worshippers intentionally seek to transcend those things that divide us. There is no true corporate worship if there is no togetherness. An instrumental prelude may be able to focus attention on the music being produced, but it cannot, in and of itself, create a beloved community.

¹⁰² Ibid., 80.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

An important gift from the African American community is its focus on the time of gathering as a time of hospitality, a time of re-entry into God's space, a time of spiritual heightening and "leveling." When the flow of the service is an appropriate blend of freedom within form, spontaneity within order, this time for unifying the community might be extended. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, worshippers are guided through period of praise, thanksgiving, personal testimonies, and prayers, which engage the entire congregation.¹⁰⁵

The main significance of this analysis for the purposes of this study is that the historical communal identity and communal culture of HBCGCs as an extension of the black church is challenged by the racial and religious diversity within their memberships. Regarding the significance of race in the identity and mission of gospel choirs, Costen states that "choirs (as well as congregations) symbolize ethnicity in the actual performance as meaning is conveyed (symbolically) through elements of sound quality, delivery style, and performance techniques; [and] the diacritical features of dress, language, and gestures represent auxiliary symbols of ethnicity in the gospel tradition."¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Costen points out that gospel music when performed outside of its liturgical context risks losing its character as the bearer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, Costen cautions against the dangers of gospel music's appeal beyond the walls of the church, she also acknowledges that "because of its emotional appeal...[gospel music] can function effectively during any worship service, especially special services of evangelism."¹⁰⁷ Costen's theology of black Christian music as a constitutive practice within the black

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰⁶ Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth*, 97-98.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 97.

worship tradition provided the theological framework for identifying and analyzing the degree to which the black Christian worship tradition is reflected in the practices and communal culture of the HBCGCs under consideration. The following chapter will disclose the descriptive theology that emerged from this analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIPTIVE THEOLOGY

Introduction

The task of descriptive theology is to “describe the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection.”¹ The theological concerns of this study emanate from the practices of three historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) in the Greater Boston area: The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, the Boston University Inner Strength Gospel Choir, and the Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir. The purpose of this chapter is to paint a rich portrait of the practices that comprise the communal life of these groups and to investigate the manner in which various participants make sense of their experience. The description that follows does not simply report the choirs’ activities and the interpretive perspectives of their directors and members; rather, it reflects my analysis of how those practices and perspectives constitute each choir’s distinctive communal identity and culture. More specifically, this analysis focuses on the degree to which the communal life of these HBCGCs function as black Christian faith communities in light of the racial and religious diversity of their memberships.

The descriptive theology presented in this chapter is not an attempt at “objective” observation and analysis; it anticipates the study’s central argument that these three HBCGCs creatively embody the black Christian faith tradition in their respective

¹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 47.

university contexts in a way that faithfully extends the black witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ beyond the confessional boundaries of the black church. HBCGCs provide cultural spaces within which mutually-critical and transformative exchanges occur between those for whom the black Christian tradition is normative and those for whom it is not, exchanges which mediate the creative work of the Holy Spirit. Although the formal articulation of this argument must wait for the theological analysis of subsequent chapters, its cogency depends in large part on the persuasive force of the descriptive material in this present chapter.

The body of the chapter is divided into three parts, one for each HBCGC under consideration. Although each HBCGC is treated separately, the analysis takes on a dialogical quality as the descriptions of the second and third choirs will make comparative reference to preceding material. Each part contains five sub-sections: 1) communal identity; 2) communal practices; 3) communal culture; 4) contextual influences on communal identity and culture; and 5) communal voices: members making meaning. “Communal identity” introduces each choir with respect to its organizational history and institutional relationship to its host university. This section also deals with how the group is defined by its members as well as the larger university community. A comprehensive (though not exhaustive) outline of each group’s activities is provided under “communal practices,” while “communal culture” reflects my observations of the ways in which communal identity and communal practices combine to shape the distinctive character of each HBCGC’s form of life. I then offer an analysis of unique “contextual influences” that impact the respective environments within which each

HBCGC develops its communal life. Finally, in the “communal voices” section, I attend to the way each director and a representative selection of student members make sense of the HBCGC experience.

The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College

Communal Identity

The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College is one of Harvard College's 400+ student organizations. Administratively, Kuumba is supported through the office for the arts at Harvard (OFA), which offers this description of Kuumba on its website and publications: "undergraduate choral group with gospel and traditional African and African American repertoire." Despite the clarity of this description, one of the defining characteristics of the Kuumba experience is the contested nature of its identity among its membership. When I asked the question, "what is Kuumba?" to various members of the choir, I received a range of responses:

"I sang in a gospel choir in high school. So, when I first saw Kuumba at convocation I said, 'Cool. Another gospel choir,' not knowing the expansive [pause]... Not knowing that Kuumba is way more than just a gospel choir."

"I usually tell people that it's a multicultural gospel choir, even though there are many inaccuracies with that statement."

"We're a choir that celebrates African and African-American expression."

"We're a black choir."

"I would say that it's a gospel choir that specializes in music from the African diaspora. But, it's so much more."

When I asked the same question of Kuumba's leadership, they responded not with a definition, but a story. Board member after board member would answer my question by rehearsing their own version of the events surrounding the organization's founding. A formal summary of this narrative is published on the organization's website. It reads, in part:

Kuumba (pronounced koo-oom-bah) was founded in 1970 by Dennis Wiley and Fred Lucas, two African American undergraduates of the Harvard class of 1972. In an era of “Black Power” and Black pride, immediately following the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the 1969 Harvard Strike, the choir emerged as a source of community, spiritual inspiration, political motivation and cultural stimulation among the small but growing number of Black students at Harvard...It was not easy for Black students to “sing the Lord’s song” in the “strange land” of Harvard during this period of racial tension and campus unrest. Yet, Kuumba not only provided spiritual inspiration—it was also a source of unity and strength. The group chose the name “Kuumba” (Swahili for “creativity”) because it best captured the choir’s intent to reflect the creative genius of Black people through the rich diversity of Diasporic music and cultural expression.²

This brief history positions Kuumba as a legacy of the black freedom struggle as it found its way onto college campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Specifically, Kuumba connects its birth with the 1969 Harvard strike, during which black students occupied University Hall and demanded that the University take steps to make Harvard a more welcoming place for black students through, among other things, the creation of the department of Afro-American studies and the Afro-American cultural center. Thus, Kuumba was conceived as more than a choir that sang black music; Kuumba was conceived as a community for black students. In choosing the name "Kuumba," the

² <http://Kuumbasingers.org>. Accessed on August 12, 2012.

founders signaled that the concept of black community at the heart of the group's identity would be shaped by the Pan-African impulse to reconstruct "blackness" not as a binary construct to "whiteness," but as a unifying category that situates American blacks within the global diasporic community of scattered Africans.

The answer to the question, "what is Kuumba?" is embedded in a story that is enacted through the group's communal practices, which must then be experienced to be fully comprehended. Even then, the experience is multilayered and difficult for members to compress into any one definition. Thus, for the members I spoke with, Kuumba is always "more" than whatever comparable entity they are invoking. For them, Kuumba is "more than just an organization"... "more than just a gospel choir"... a "choir that specializes in music from the African diaspora. But, it's so much more."

Communal Practices

The Kuumba Singers host three major concert events throughout the academic year: a two-night Christmas concert series at the end of the fall semester, a traveling tour over spring break, and a final concert near the end of the spring semester. Members of Kuumba spend the majority of their time together learning music at their biweekly rehearsals. The choir is supported musically by the "Kuumband," which is comprised of a combination of members of the choir and outside musicians who are hired specifically for the concerts. Kuumba concerts also feature a "Praise Dance" team, original visual art that is displayed in the concert programs, and dramatic readings of biblical passages, poems, and original pieces by members of the choir.

Even given the diversity of artistic expression contained in a Kuumba concert, it became apparent to the group's leadership that Kuumba was incapable of achieving its goal of presenting a broader range of black creativity and spirituality through the concert venue alone. In 1998, the leadership of Kuumba created the Black Arts Festival – a weekend-long celebration that includes a performing arts showcase, a visual art exhibition, and symposia on various topics related to the intersection of arts and the black community. The annual event features black artists from the Harvard community as well as invited guests and celebrities from the U.S. at large.

While the rehearsals and the additional gatherings that take place in preparation of Kuumba events provide opportunities for choir members to build relationships with one another, there are several intentional community-building activities. In the fall semester, the executive board hosts a Kuumba retreat, during which they invite the entire choir to devote the majority of a Saturday to talking about what the choir's history and mission mean for each individual's participation in the group. A similar discussion takes place in the spring while the group is on tour. The members of Kuumba refer to the discussion on tour as "the race talk" because of its focus on the challenge that the choir's racially diverse membership poses to the choir's mission of being a cultural space for black students. These two mandatory events – the fall retreat and the spring tour discussion – are supplemented throughout the year by informal, voluntary "Kuumba dinners" before each rehearsal. Finally, the choir may host informal outings throughout the year to which a majority of the choir will travel together.

Communal Culture

Rehearsals are the dominant formative experience shaping the culture of the choir. The Kuumba Singers rehearse twice as much as most HBCGCs in the Boston area. Members commit, at a minimum, to attending two rehearsals during the week, with each rehearsal lasting between two and three hours. In the several weeks prior to a concert, an extra hour is added to the regular rehearsal time and additional "sectionals" are scheduled for other days of the week, including weekends. For members who participate on the praise dance team, who play in the Kuumband, or who will be featured as a reader or soloist, they are expected to schedule rehearsals outside of the time allotted for the choir. Members of the two a cappella sub-groups—"Brothers" and "Sisters"—rehearse an additional 5 to 10 hours per week throughout the semester. Given that there are approximately 400 student run organizations at Harvard – approximately 1 organization for every 15 undergraduate students – most students are involved in multiple organizations and usually provide leadership for at least one. In this climate, the level of commitment that Kuumba requires of its members is rare and has a profound impact on the culture of the group as a tight-knit community.

Kuumba's communal culture is also shaped by the form of the rehearsal. The rehearsal is called to order by the director, a board member, or one of the assistant (student) directors using a West African call and response chant. The leader calls out, "ago" (pronounced 'Ah-go') which can be translated to mean, "Do I have your attention?" The choir responds, "ame" (pronounced 'Ah-meh') which means, "yes, I am listening" or "you have my attention." The call and response is followed by silence. The

person who called the rehearsal to order will sometimes remind the choir that the purpose of the silence is to meditate or pray – to empty themselves of the cares and concerns that they brought into the rehearsal space and prepare to focus on their time together. After the opening ritual, the majority of the time is consumed with learning the music. Each rehearsal then ends with a ritual referred to as "the Kuumba circle." Members of the choir join hands and form a large circle around the edges of the room. One of the leaders of the group will then prompt the choir members to share "praise reports" and "prayer requests" with the group. At times the ritual ends with the choir singing a song or someone reciting a poem. However, it typically ends with a prayer. After the closing of the Kuumba circle, most members remain in the rehearsal space talking with one another for an additional 15 to 20 minutes.

From a community-building perspective, the importance of the opening call and response and the closing Kuumba circle cannot be overstated. By opening every rehearsal with a West African gathering ritual, the members of Kuumba are reminded of the Pan-African ideals of their founders. For the opening ritual, members are instructed to use the moment of silence as an opportunity to forget all that is happening in the rest of their lives and to focus on the task at hand – learning and singing music – and on the community with whom they are engaging in that task. Then, at the end of rehearsal, members are instructed to recall all that is happening with them in the rest of their lives and to bring those things back into the communal space where they can be transformed from private joys and struggles into shared celebration and collective perseverance. Several interviewees indicated that the majority of those who offer the closing prayer do

so using Christian language (a fact that is not without some controversy, as we shall see below). These opening and closing rituals create an aura of reverence that demarcates a rupture in time—a delineation between the time that the choir is about to share with each other and the rhythms of college life that precede it. They signal that “Kuumba time” is different from the rest of one's college life. It is special time. It is sacred time.

The black Christian worship tradition influences the communal culture that is nurtured within the rehearsal space in unspoken, yet very palpable ways. References to "God" and "spirit" are fairly common in the speech of Kuumba's members and leadership. However, explicit reference to Christianity is rare, except when applied specifically to explaining the lyrics of a Christ-centered song. Yet, the majority of the group's repertoire is from the black Christian worship tradition including Negro spirituals and various styles of gospel music. Although Kuumba's birth narrative articulates the founders' commitment to embrace a wider range of black spirituality, Kuumba's communal culture is defined to a large degree by black *Christian* spirituality because of the predominance of black Christian sacred music in the choir's repertoire and the personal Christian faith commitment of those whose voices are most heard during the group's corporate prayers.

In contrast to the way the black Christian tradition lies beneath the surface of Kuumba's communal practices, the tradition frequently referred to as "the black freedom struggle" features prominently in the language of Kuumba's leadership when they ascribe meaning and significance to the choir's activities. The choir members are provided with cultural education about the different eras in black American history that gave birth to the

various styles of music that they sing. Regardless of what time period is being discussed – the period of slavery, the reconstruction era, the Jim Crow era, the civil rights movement, the post-civil rights era – the metanarrative upon which all of the individual stories rest is the struggle of black people to obtain their full humanity in the face of the various forms of injustice that they endured. In keeping with Kuumba’s Pan-African impulse, the black freedom struggle narrative also encompasses the anti-colonial movements on the continent of Africa, which are referenced when the choir is learning a song in an African language. As mentioned above, the lyrics of the majority of the songs that Kuumba sings are not only religious in nature, but often explicitly Christian. However, when discussing the significance of the songs, Christian spirituality is usually not depicted as an end unto itself, but as a cultural resource that enabled black people in their struggle for freedom.

Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture

There are three contextually significant factors that impact the negotiation Kuumba’s contested sense of identity and mission. First, members of Kuumba must make sense of their organization’s mission in light of the growth and development of other black student organizations. Older alumni of Kuumba reminisce about their experience of Kuumba as the center of the black student community at Harvard. To hear them tell it, every black Harvard student was a member of Kuumba. Although this claim is dubious, what is more important is their recollection that it *felt* as if every black Harvard student was a member of Kuumba. That experience is no longer the case for current members of Kuumba given the existence of other black social organizations such

as the Black Students Association (BSA), the Association of Black Harvard Women (ABHW), the Black Men's Forum (BMF), and the African Students Association (ASA) as well as the emergence of alternative black artistic organizations such as BlackCAST (Community and Student Theater) and Harvard College Keychange: A Black A Cappella Experience.

The second contextually significant factor impacting the negotiation of Kuumba's contested identity was the creation of the first official on-campus religious organization targeting black students in 2008. Although Kuumba's founders did not want to limit their exploration of black spirituality to the Christian tradition, Kuumba nevertheless developed into the unofficial home for black Christian students at Harvard. By combining their participation in Kuumba with informal Bible study groups, black Christians had all of the benefits of a full-fledged campus ministry at their disposal. As a result, few black Christians at Harvard participated in the predominantly white campus ministry organizations sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ.

In 1993, InterVarsity authorized a new approach to engaging Asian-American students at Harvard. For the first time in its history, InterVarsity amended their "multi-ethnic" model and approved the creation of a Christian Fellowship that would target a specific ethnic group: the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian-American Christian Fellowship (AACF). Given the success of the AACF model, InterVarsity sponsored a Bible study group called "SoulFood" that targeted black students at Harvard in the early 2000s. By 2008, SoulFood had expanded into a comprehensive campus ministry and was officially

recognized by InterVarsity as Harvard College Black Christian Fellowship (BCF). With the development of SoulFood and its growth into BCF, Kuumba was no longer the de facto organizational home for black Christian community.

Although I encountered no evidence of negative feelings on the part of Kuumba members toward BCF, its existence still challenges Kuumba's negotiation of its identity and mission in two critical respects. First, the presence of BCF threatens Kuumba's ability to recruit and retain students whose main reason for joining Kuumba was the opportunity to experience black Christian community on campus. While I met students who participate in both organizations, I also spoke with one student who chose BCF over Kuumba when the demands on her schedule forced her to choose between the two. For the majority of Kuumba's existence, such a choice would not have been possible. Second, the existence of BCF alters the context within which Kuumba members ask themselves the question, "How 'Christian' should Kuumba be?" At several points throughout Kuumba's history, major rifts within the choir's membership were exposed when this question would emerge from its usual place beneath the surface of things to become an explicitly stated concern. The central tension that animated these debates was the juxtaposition of Kuumba's practical function as the only center of black Christian community and the resistance to that very function that is implied in the group's mission. The existence of BCF has the potential to alter the nature of this debate by relieving Kuumba of the pressure to privilege the Christian tradition in its expressions of black spirituality. Thus, BCF greatly impacts Kuumba's identity because the debate itself is central to Kuumba's communal culture.

Finally, Kuumba's contested identity is negotiated in the context of the changing demographics in its membership and the impact that those changes have had on Kuumba's image within the greater Harvard community. Kuumba's membership was almost exclusively black over the course of the first 25 years of its history. However, in the past 15 years Kuumba has experienced increased racial diversity in its membership, which has led to its marketing by the University as the quintessential model of multiculturalism at Harvard. Because of the high visibility that this branding affords Kuumba, it has been embraced to a certain degree in the choir's own public relations material. Although Kuumba's increasing diversity and the resultant shift in its public image from a black organization to a multicultural organization has its advantages, this evolution poses an enormous challenge to Kuumba's leadership in their attempt to sustain Kuumba's mission and identity as a black cultural space.

Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning

Director, Sheldon Reid

One of the most important aspects of Sheldon Reid's leadership of Kuumba is the intentional initiation of new members into an understanding of Kuumba's mission. Yet, his own discovery of Kuumba's history was quite accidental. Reid recalls that at the time he joined Kuumba as a first-year student in 1992, there was no communal awareness among the membership about the circumstances that led to the creation of Kuumba:

I wasn't cognizant of the history of Kuumba when I joined. When I joined, there wasn't this focus on that. When you don't have food to eat it,

you're not worried about where you're vacationing in the summer. You know? So, when I got to Kuumba the focus was really on getting people there and learning music and being able to perform. And the choir was a fantastic experience...but, there was no talk from the student leadership about "this is where we came from, this is –." It was just like, "Oh, we sing. We're a gospel choir and we sing." It wasn't until a few years in that I actually started learning about the history. Part of it was just because of drama. Then I started talking to [the director] Mr. [Robert] Winfrey more and asking him about – and I started to develop relationships with some of the [alumni/ae] who would always come back to help out. They loved to tell stories. So, that's where a lot of [the history] is coming from. It really – these [alumni/ae] who came back and the stories they told very much shaped my understanding of what it meant to be in Kuumba – this idea of how you give back.

When Reid stated that he began to ask about Kuumba's history in part because of "drama," he was referring to arguments that were taking place within the choir that were precipitated by the demographic shifts discussed above with respect to race and religious affiliation. These arguments persisted after Reid assumed the directorship in 1997. He soon arrived at the following analysis of the problem:

As Kuumba got bigger and got a little more [of] note, the spirit of what we were doing was very noticed. So, it's all music that's for the most part rooted in the black church tradition. And the spirit of that can't be denied. So, people would come to our concerts and, whether you want to argue it was musically tight or not, you can feel the Spirit. And that drew the Christian community. So, the first white people who were trying to join Kuumba were trying to join because it spoke to their love of God – my impression.

What this brought about, of course, were two things. One is the internal frustration. Kuumba was a place of identity security for a lot of black people. So, all of a sudden where your space – and we're talking about black people who, you know, either had been ultra "pro-black" their whole lives, or a lot of whom had been to nothing but white schools to a large extent. So, they come and do this thing that is black and they feel like, "I'm finally getting in touch with myself as an individual of blackness." And then, now the identity of that space feels threatened. So there were some people who reacted negatively or [were] concerned, understandably, because we're talking about emotions, right? And so you have these tensions about, "Well, not that we dislike these individuals, but

having these people in the choir changes the space for me. What does that mean?”

A similar tension arose for those people who felt like, “This is a gospel choir and there are people here who are not Christian. And how do they feel about singing those songs? How do I feel about them singing those songs?” Which are complex questions...but, those tensions would bubble under the surface and then explode.

Reid's diagnosis of the tension-explosion cycle was that they occurred due to a lack of understanding of Kuumba's history and, therefore, a failure to ground the culture of the community in the values that inhabit that history. Without this grounding, the choir's identity could not maintain its coherence as the demographics of the membership continued to shift.

Reid's prescription for this problem was to take the elements of his own initiation that had occurred by chance and to make them intentional components of Kuumba's communal life:

These [demographic] shifts have really had an effect on how we do things...When the group is all black, there is a sense of community that exists even though there may not be community. Black people will walk into a room of black people – and not everybody, but – and feel comfortable because they feel everyone there understands them. It can be completely untrue. Particularly, at Harvard, you grab 10 black people [and] they have 10 very different black experiences. But if you let them all sit at a table they just feel there's a comfort there. And because of that, things could just happen automatically. That sense of community, that to me is a part of doing this music properly, is almost automatically there.

[Now] we have to do more constructing of those times. I have to take time in rehearsal [to say], “Meet somebody new. Spend some time. Let's talk about stuff.” We do historical moments in rehearsal, talk about Kuumba history, or important black people [as a part of] what we do. Or, sometimes the librarian will hand out things from [Kuumba's] library like old articles, old photos and have people break down into groups and discuss, “What do you think you're seeing?” and just have them share some of the thoughts they talked about. [I try] to really create that sense of community and that sense of connection to this thing and be intentional about talking about the music and where it comes from and what it means

to me, what it means to black culture in general – not that I can speak for black people all over the world. But, [I] try to do that in a way that is impassioned and [with] feeling. [I] try to get people [in the choir] who do feel connected to the music in a spiritual sense to talk about “Where is this coming from in the Bible? What does it mean to you as a Christian?” [I] ask people [in advance], to make sure that’s being done because if someone doesn’t volunteer to do it, it won’t be there. And that shared experience of learning what it means to other people, that helps shape what it means to you.

For Reid, the continuity with the traditional mission of Kuumba is achieved by maintaining a discursive emphasis on the historical reality of black suffering and the black freedom struggle from which the songs spring. This examination of the historical context of the music becomes a springboard for conversations about the persistence of racism in our time and the continued necessity of cultural institutions such as Kuumba to serve as “a safe space for black people.”

In response to the diversity of the choir, Reid reinterprets this mantra by proclaiming Kuumba as “a safe space to be uncomfortable.” Reid’s amended description of Kuumba’s mission signifies that a communal focus on the persistence of racism and on the cultural resources (creativity and spirituality) that black people utilize in their fight for freedom will result in uncomfortable conversations because individual members of the choir have very different experiences and perspectives with regard to race and religion. Reid describes the genesis of this reinterpreted image of Kuumba this way:

I wanted to be very intentional about instead of waiting for these tensions...let's talk about it. Let's keep the pressure off and create a space where people can be frank. And some people were just like, “Actually as a Christian, yeah, I'm offended when non-believers – I know you don't believe this and you're up there singing those words. That, to me, is disrespectful.” Or, some people feeling that, you know, “It’s completely alright for you to sing and not believe because, still, the music is speaking to you. And, what is the mission?”” A place where people can be frank

and say, “It makes me uncomfortable to have you here, and yet, I still love you.” You know, helping them get to that place [where] those who are offended, those who feel like, “As a black person it makes me feel like – Do you understand as a non-black person that this is not your space, that it’s not for you? Because you have to have that understanding to come into this space.” And just creating a space where people can say those things, people can hear those things. And, you know what? It makes everyone uncomfortable, but people share that and still realize the next day, “We are still Kuumba.”

In moving from a “safe space for black people” to a “safe space to be uncomfortable,” Kuumba’s role is no longer to provide a context for the development of a unified black community that serves as a cultural refuge from hostility based on racial difference. Rather, Kuumba’s role is to provide the context for the creation of a diverse community whose commitment level is strong enough to withstand the pain of confronting the deep implications of racial and religious difference.

Given the degree of discomfort that Kuumba intentionally invites into its communal culture, I asked Reid to explain what contributes to Kuumba's ability to maintain such a high level of commitment from its members. He responded:

The main thing, I think, is the support piece. It is a place where people feel connected, cared for, and community. And that, to me, is one of my biggest goals as well. I want it to be a place where people feel safe being uncomfortable. A lot of people after being in for a semester will say, “Yeah, the first time I got there people were sharing all their business,” or, “we just had a great rehearsal and someone, at the end, just breaks down crying because their father just died of cancer.” To be in this space and be able to share things with people I don't necessarily know, but trust. The idea that there is someone you don't know, and yet, who you know cares about you.

To some people it’s normal because, while it's not executed as well in some places, it's kind of a tenet of black church: “This is your family. You may not know that woman who just beat your behind for running in the church, but you know that she has a right to do that; or this person who just picked you up because you fell down and you were crying.” There’s this idea of extended community which, in many ways, is a core of black

culture; this extended family; the larger tribe; the larger families; people living with their cousins, their aunt, their grandmother. That was standard and continues to break down because of the way this country works. So, the church was that larger community for a lot of people. And, there are a lot of people who come to Kuumba who have never had that type of experience, but [Kuumba] becomes that thing for them.

Part of that is also the music. Singing about God and God's love, you will be touched by the Spirit. Period. Regardless of what you believe, that's not going to stop God from speaking to your heart. And people will call it whatever, but you'll feel it. And they'll be like, "Oh, I love the spirit in this room," or, "this positive energy!" Whatever you want to call it, God's touching you...Being on stage or being in a room and singing a song and feeling the power of that song and having everyone be – and, not everyone, but – people connect to it, stop thinking about it, and start feeling it. And feel what the writer was trying to say, feel the power that's in the song itself. It can happen in rehearsal and be just the thing that someone needed to hear that day, that moment.

Reid cites the black church as the generative source of Kuumba's form of community.

More specifically, he emphasizes the fact that the group's primary activity is singing about God and God's love. Reid argues that this practice is in itself transformative regardless of the confessional stance of the participants. This transformational encounter with God, mediated through the music of the black church, breeds a familial allegiance among those who share the experience together. Although Reid – himself a committed member of a local Seventh Day Adventist church – laments that Kuumba functions as a substitute for church attendance among some of its members, he welcomes the favorable comparison between the two institutions as evidence that Kuumba continues to be faithful to its historic function as extended black family.

“Jennifer”

Jennifer remembers her first Kuumba rehearsal like it was yesterday. Other first year students walked cautiously through the gathered crowd, perhaps intimidated by the animated greetings being exchanged by the returning choir members. Jennifer, however, cut a path through the sea of embraces toward Kuumba’s director, Sheldon Reid. He was an easy target. Standing at 6’4” and boasting a hearty laugh, Reid’s physical presence dominated the room. Undeterred, this petite first year student walked right up to the imposing director and declared, “Hi, I’m Jennifer, and I’m going to be in Kuumba.”

Now in her senior year, Jennifer smiled and shook her head in disbelief as she recalled her innocent audacity. “Sheldon was definitely surprised at my boldness,” Jennifer reflected. “But, that’s how I felt. As soon as I was accepted to Harvard, I knew that I would be in Kuumba.” While attending a private boarding school, Jennifer sang in her school’s gospel choir. The director of Jennifer’s high school gospel choir had been an active member of her own collegiate gospel choir while attending another Boston-area university, and she was well acquainted with the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College. “It wasn’t even an option,” Jennifer concluded. “[My director] made it very clear that when I got to Harvard I needed to join Kuumba.”

Jennifer cites that first rehearsal as a defining moment not only for her, but for the other Kuumba members from the class of 2012. After the initial period of conversation, Reid immediately began to teach a medley of Civil Rights freedom songs that he

arranged along with one of the student assistant directors. “I was in awe that in just an hour that they could produce that.” However, it was the communal welcome that Jennifer felt after the singing was over that made the lasting impact. “It felt like home,” she recalled, “That’s what I was looking for. I wasn’t looking just to sing. I was looking for that home.”

Since that first rehearsal, Jennifer threw herself into all things Kuumba: working on the planning committee for the Black Arts Festival, coordinating the praise dance team, committing significant hours to organizing Kuumba's 40th anniversary celebration weekend, and serving as a board member for two years. Jennifer confesses that after several years of such deep engagement in the life of the choir, the innocence of that first rehearsal has been replaced by a more complex "love/hate relationship with Kuumba." Yet, this complexity has not diminished Jennifer's commitment to Kuumba, which she "can't imagine ever not being in while [at Harvard]."

Given Jennifer's high level of commitment to Kuumba, I was not surprised at the level of clarity and sophistication with which she discussed the nature of Kuumba's identity:

What is Kuumba? I think we all get that question. So, if I don't have time to explain – you know, we’re Harvard people; we’re busy [*laughs*] – but, if I don't have time to explain, then I just say, “We're a choir that celebrates black creativity and spirituality.” You know, like, the canned answer that we all have.

But, if I have more time than that, then I explain to people that we’re a choir that was founded 41 years ago in the face of adversity on the Harvard campus due to racial tension and we've evolved into this group that has become a community and a safe space for students of many different races, but still maintains the mission of celebrating black creativity and spirituality. But, we’ve also extended it from song to dance and prose and spoken word and all sorts of other things.

And, if have to give just a one-word answer it would be: family – this family thing that we all just sort of – it’s not really tangible, but it’s there. And that’s what Kuumba is. But, I also think it’s something that can’t be so easily explained to people because I feel like if you’ve never been to a concert, if you’ve never sat through rehearsal, if you’ve never spent time with Sheldon, like, it’s really hard to grasp exactly what [Kuumba] is.

Like Reid, Jennifer points to Kuumba’s history as a response to the adversity that blacks encountered on Harvard’s campus as the heart of Kuumba’s communal identity. Also like Reid, Jennifer acknowledges the evolution of that identity as the community maintains its commitment to that history even as its racial composition changes.

Although Jennifer’s primary image of Kuumba was one of a loving and supportive family, she acknowledged that several points of tension do exist within the choir. First, Jennifer identified that "race is a source of tension." However, she quickly added, "But, I don't think we'd be doing our jobs if it wasn't something that was on our minds when we're in that space." Jennifer explained that placing the problem of race in America at the forefront of concern is constitutive of the Kuumba experience. She referenced the tour discussion as an example of the ways in which race and racism are addressed in intentional ways as a part of what it means to be community together. Jennifer went on to say that the religious differences within Kuumba can be a source of tension, albeit to a lesser degree since religion is discussed neither as often, nor as intentionally, as race. However, Jennifer stated that she can sense the non-Christian members of Kuumba becoming uncomfortable "when we get into discussions about: What does this song mean? Who are we singing to? What are we singing about? What message are we

spreading?” Jennifer indicated that after these moments of tension, she has reached out in sympathy to those who are not “typical black and Christian Kuumba members.”

Jennifer disclosed that as a person of mixed race, she experiences the racial tension within the choir in a very personal and complex way. She offered the following anecdote as an example of the subtle ways in which her racial identity is disaffirmed:

I remember when this year's board was elected someone said, “Oh, we have an all-black board! This is great! It's been a little while since this happened.” I looked around and I said, “Actually, we have one white person because two of us are mixed.” [*Laughs*] No, seriously, because I was like, “You can't take half of me and excuse the other.” And that is something I've had to work through on my own in Kuumba because they like to use me for the blackness but, sort of, leave behind the whiteness.

Interestingly, Jennifer claims that the conversations about race that she has had within Kuumba are the reason she has such conviction about asserting and defending her identity as a bi-racial person. Jennifer grew up in a predominantly white town and, despite her fair complexion she was almost always the darkest kid in the class which “came with the responsibility to represent the race.” Jennifer cited the importance of “the race talks” in forcing her to ask herself, “Wait. Who am I?” Jennifer felt both challenged and empowered to take ownership over her own racial identity as she considered for the first time how to make sense of her bi-racial heritage in relationship to Kuumba's mission. Because of Kuumba's emphasis on the importance of creating a space where black people have the freedom of self-determination, the freedom to embrace all of who they are, it emboldened Jennifer to insist on her own freedom to be recognized for all of who she is – both black and white.

Jennifer's wrestling with her bi-racial heritage and her subsequent embrace of the complexity of racial identity in her own life placed her at odds with some Kuumba members who held what she felt was a dangerously reductionist conception of race. More importantly, Jennifer resented that these narrow conceptions of racial identity were fueling a racially exclusive vision of community that was manifesting itself in selective recruitment practices:

The race thing is the toughest thing for me to deal with, a lot of times, in Kuumba. The active recruiting of black students and just – not ignoring white students, but making them come to us – it's a very interesting mentality that I don't agree with mostly. I think I am tolerant and understanding of the reasoning behind it. But, at the same time, it just seems wrong to me...

I've gotten the response back of, "This is a black organization." And this is, again, one of those tension things: "Are we a black organization? Are we a multicultural organization?" I agree that we're a black organization, but when it comes to – [*pause*]. The labeling of people [*long pause*] is very difficult for me to just accept. Also, as a person who is ethnically ambiguous, you can't always tell who's a black person by looking at them...

It sort of sounds bad either way you put it: "Oh, well, we should only actively recruit black students." Or, "we should actively recruit everyone for a black organization." Even when I say it, it doesn't necessarily make sense. But, at the same time, I see no reason to discriminate against people who are not black. I mean, let's talk about a turnaround! It doesn't make sense to me to do that... If we're gonna be so open and understanding to people joining us, why do we have this target group that we're trying to recruit? And when we get a white person, you know, people say things like, "Oh, that's nice." But we get a black male, and it's like [*claps hands*] "Hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus!" And I'm just like, "Okay, yeah. But, they're two equivalent people!" So, I haven't really resolved that issue in, necessarily, how I feel about it... But, there is a push towards – I don't want to say "refilling" – um, reinvigorating the black population within the choir.

Jennifer concedes that the debate is not a simple one. On the one hand, she recognizes that "part of it is a numbers thing," meaning that Kuumba must maintain a healthy

percentage of black students in its membership or it risks having its identity devolve into a "multicultural organization." On the other hand, Jennifer interprets selective recruitment as a violation of the central premise of Kuumba's founding which was to protest discrimination on the basis of race. Jennifer revealed that the reason she was so passionate about the issue of selective recruitment was because of her own experience with respect to other black student organizations on campus. "The reason why the only black organization I'm in any way involved with is Kuumba...is because none of those groups actively recruited me." Jennifer recalled the pain of feeling as if she somehow did not measure up to whatever image of blackness those organizations held as their standard for inclusion. Part of the reason Jennifer loves Kuumba is because, while it is a black organization, its "open and understanding" ethos communicated a culture of welcome that distinguished it from the other black organizations.

Jennifer is careful to put any points of contention into context by noting that they do not overshadow the generally positive and supportive nature of the relationships within Kuumba. When I asked Jennifer what she loved the most about Kuumba, she replied with no hesitation, "Hands down, the people – even the ones that I clash with." Jennifer emphasizes that any tension or disagreements that exist within the choir pale in comparison to the personal commitment that Kuumba members have to one another. Jennifer experienced the restorative embrace of the Kuumba community at several critical points in her college career:

Coming to Harvard...was a tough transition, and so, I really needed God at the time. I remember bawling every day on my knees at my bed, just like, "God, get me through another hour of my life." And so, I think I was using Kuumba to fill that space in my life a lot more that year...

[Recently, a family member] passed away right before my final exams started. I was a complete and utter mess...So, other than talking to my family, the first thing I did was tell people in Kuumba, "Listen, I need support," and then people just come; people just to keep me company because I didn't want to be alone; people just offering all sorts of things, like people forcing me to eat. When you need those people, regardless of if it's not the relationship you have with them every single day people come out to support you. And I've done the same thing for my friends in Kuumba when they've gone through tough things. I feel completely – I want to be there, and I just feel compelled by what we share to be there for someone, calling them, like, "Hey! Is everything okay? Do you want me to stop by? Do you want me to get you notes?" When someone is in need in the choir there is definitely a call to action...It's there, and I do utilize it when I need to because everyone gets to points where you can't handle this alone. And so, it's amazing what Kuumba can do when Kuumba comes together to get things done.

Jennifer later clarified that while Kuumba is a "spiritual community," she does not consider it a substitute for church. Jennifer defines the primary purpose of church as helping her "develop a relationship with God." She indicates that there are several other outlets for that purpose including local churches and the on-campus Black Christian Fellowship, "SoulFood," which Jennifer notes "is run by Kuumba people." However, Jennifer identifies the secondary purpose of church as providing her with a supportive extended family. With respect to this function of church, Jennifer does turn to Kuumba to fill the void. Furthermore, Jennifer feels "compelled" to support other members when they are in need. Jennifer refers to this communal care as "get[ting] things done." For Jennifer, the business of Kuumba is coming together as a family.

“Elizabeth”

In many ways, Elizabeth and Jennifer share the same Kuumba story. Like Jennifer, Elizabeth joined Kuumba within her first week of her first year on campus.

Also like Jennifer, Elizabeth has devoted a significant amount of her college career to various leadership roles within Kuumba including the Black Arts Festival committee, the “Sisters of Kuumba” a cappella group, and the executive board. Expectedly, when I asked Elizabeth to answer the question, "what is Kuumba?" she immediately rattled off what Jennifer had referred to as the "canned" description of Kuumba's history that is drilled into the minds of Kuumba's members. However, she quickly distinguished herself from Jennifer as she clarified her personal view of what the implications of that history should be for the current choir:

I could give you the spiel that we always give. [*clears throat and sits up straight, as if delivering prepared remarks*] Kuumba is the largest multicultural group on Harvard's campus. We have over 70 members of all different nationalities, representing 20 different nations. We were founded in the 1970s surrounding incidents of racial tension at Harvard where African-Americans felt disregarded, and there wasn't a space for African-Americans... That's the spiel.

But, my version of that is: yeah, we're a group; but we're a *black* group. Multicultural is lovely. There are a lot of different places for that. But, I don't think we should take away what we've been for the last 40 to 41 years. I think that we are a black group.

Elizabeth argues that respect for the group's founding necessitates that the current leaders protect Kuumba's historic function as a communal space that is, if not exclusively, then at least primarily for black students.

Elizabeth did not always feel this way about Kuumba. In fact, at the beginning of her time in Kuumba she felt very much the same as Jennifer with respect to the place of non-black students within the choir. However, Elizabeth dismisses that initial perspective as due to her lack of understanding of Kuumba's mission. She credits her

first "Kuumba tour discussion" as the spark that ignited what she describes as her "more black militant" stance:

To tell you the truth, I had no idea what I was getting into with Kuumba. I knew that it was predominantly black, but I didn't know that it was a gospel choir. I remember, actually, not fully understanding what I now know about Kuumba – what Kuumba is and how it developed into this space at Harvard – until spring tour. I was like, "Well, we sing songs. This is nice. This is nice and friendly." And then I went to tour and my mind was completely blown...

I remember being blown away about the things that we talked about. Because we talked about what a person who is not of African descent, what their place in Kuumba is. And I had never thought about it. Because one of my closest friends in Kuumba – actually, I have two close friends who are not African-American, or African, not black at all – and they're the two closest people that I'm friends with in Kuumba. To a certain extent it made me upset, because what I was hearing – and, again, coming from someone who is completely ignorant as to what Kuumba really was – what I was hearing was that there wasn't really a place for them in this space. But then what I really came to realize was that what was being said was not that there wasn't space for them in [Kuumba], but that it's a space *for* African-Americans and Africans and black people that didn't have a space. You know, like, we were outcasts. I think that it's great for [non-blacks] to be able to come into that space and enjoy it for what it is. But, again, it's a choice that they get, where this isn't a choice for me. This is a space that I *have* to live in. So, I think realizing what you can do in that space, and how to be respectful of that space, and realize that it's a choice for you. And that's great that you're partaking of another, of a different culture other than your own. But, it's not a choice for a lot of people. For a lot of people, this is their life. It's not something that they can jump in and out of. It's something that they have to stay in. And I think that's when I really came to understand Kuumba for what it was.

When Elizabeth was confronted with Kuumba's history during that tour discussion, she began to read her own experience into that story. When she describes the experience of Kuumba's founders ("*we* were outcasts"), she includes herself in their experience of exclusion. By reading the plight of current black students into the history of black resistance and survival, Elizabeth is able to reinterpret the goal of keeping Kuumba as an

intentionally black space. Rather than viewing that mission as an act of exclusion against non-blacks, Elizabeth now understood it as a necessary corrective of the prior act of exclusion against blacks. Thus, while Elizabeth does not believe that Kuumba should exclude non-blacks from membership, she argues that their membership is conditional of their acceptance of and respect for the need for black students to maintain primary ownership of the community.

Although Elizabeth and Jennifer hold differing viewpoints about the level of openness Kuumba should have towards non-black members, they seem to agree in their assessment that Kuumba stands as a necessary alternative to the restrictive racial politics present in other black student organizations. Elizabeth extols the ability of Kuumba to foster a unified black community while at the same time allowing for the affirmation of the diversity that exists within the black community:

There are a lot of different ways to be black. And I think that's really important here at Harvard because I think that when you go to different communities, there's sometimes this thought of a homogenous experience or shared experience. And, to a certain extent, at Harvard we do have that shared experience. There's probably not one person here that is black who hasn't had to deal with someone saying, "You talk like a white person," or, "Why are you acting white?" Or, things like that, and I think that is something that is very much shared among this community. But, that being said, there are still so many different experiences... I know that sometimes there's a lot of tension in the black community here at Harvard – kind of, "Are you black enough?" But, Kuumba is really special in the fact that those questions aren't ever asked. And I'm not saying that Kuumba is perfect because Kuumba is made up of people, and people are hardly perfect. But, I know that we don't have a lot of the same problems that a lot of the other black organizations have. And I guess that's basically going back to the question, "What is Kuumba?" Kuumba is a place where you are accepted for who you are and your experience – your black experience – that's never ever denied of you or downplayed. And if it's downplayed by an individual in the choir, then that's not representative of what Kuumba is.

Part of the reason that Elizabeth insists that Kuumba remain an explicitly black communal space is because of her assessment that the other black organizations are not healthy environments for black students to affirm their racial identity, many of whom have had the authenticity of their blackness questioned and challenged before coming to Harvard. Thus, Kuumba's historical role as a "safe space for black people" is still necessary because although there are other organizations that are explicitly black, in Elizabeth's estimation, they are not safe.

Despite Elizabeth's negative assessment of the culture within other black student organizations, she acknowledges that Kuumba is not a utopia for black students. In fact, Elizabeth shared that during the most recent "race talk" she had been accused of doing the very thing that she abhorred – challenging the way that other black students make sense of their own racial identity:

Basically, the conversation started off with someone saying, "I am not *just* black. I am from Ghana," or, "I am from Nigeria." And I was hurt. And I told them that hurt me because I am *just* black. There is no other identification that I can give you other than that about my ethnicity. There's a lot of other things that define me. There are so many things that define me. But, that is still a huge part of who I am, and I don't think I should have to deny that or downplay it. And what I was trying to get at – what I had difficulties explaining – was that ["black"] is my identity. I need that to be enough. I don't need anyone to ask me, "But, where are your people from?" I don't need those extra questions. I need black to be enough and I need being black to be a place in itself because that's where – like, that's my home country. And I think what happened was that it kind of got misunderstood because a lot of the people who are second-generation [Americans], they felt I was trying to discount their black experience and I wasn't. I was trying to say that I need them to value that that's all I have...

One of my friends in Kuumba – this was another discussion – she said that she was Haitian and that's it; she's not black. Because for some immigrants, there is a stigma that comes with being black in America and

[with] black Americans, and that is the last thing that they want to be associated with. And I told her, “You are Haitian; that's fantastic. But in America, when you're walking down the street, you are a black woman just like I am. For your own comfort, [Haitian] is how you identify yourself, but in this world, in this place, [black] is what you are. And you have to deal with other people's identification of you because you live in a world of other people.” To one extent it's sad, but I think it's also – I am happy to share my culture with you. I think black is great!

As she tells me the story, Elizabeth is clearly sensitive to the fact that by challenging the way other black students made sense of their race she had impacted them in the same negative way that she described the other black student organizations impacting her. However, Elizabeth argues that her efforts in this regard were wholly consistent with her critique of the other black student organizations. Elizabeth interpreted the hesitance of those who did not identify as “just” black as revealing of their perception that there was something undesirable, or at least insufficient, about African-Americans. Thus, as opposed to devaluing *their* black experience, Elizabeth viewed her actions as defending herself against their devaluation of *her* black experience. Furthermore, Elizabeth argues that rather than reducing the range of experiences and backgrounds that would qualify someone for inclusion in the black community, she was advocating an expansive vision of black American community that embraces and absorbs all people of African descent regardless of the path by which they arrived on American shores. Although Elizabeth acknowledges that the formation of such an inclusive black community is facilitated by the persistence of racial prejudice, she maintains that the resultant black culture and sense of shared identity has an intrinsic value that is worth protecting.

Perhaps, more interesting than the specific explanation that Elizabeth offers regarding her role in these conversations, is her description of the conversations

themselves. Elizabeth describes these conversations as emotionally draining. The conversations are contentious and deeply personal. Given the significant tension that is generated by these conversations, I wondered why Kuumba members would continue to participate in them. Elizabeth offers a clue when she recounts her address to the Haitian member. Though their exchange was heated, Elizabeth began the story by referring to her interlocutor as "one of my friends in Kuumba." These conversations are not taking place among casual acquaintances who can simply walk away when the tension gets too thick. These are hard truths and heartfelt emotions being expressed among friends who feel compelled to continue the painful conversation out of love.

"Pamela"

Unlike Jennifer and Elizabeth, who joined Kuumba as soon as they stepped onto Harvard's campus, Pamela did not join until her sophomore year after attending several Kuumba concerts. Pamela remembers watching her first Christmas Concert and thinking, "This is amazing; it reminds me of home. I thought it was so great that a space like that was at Harvard." Pamela was very involved in church at home. Since as far back as she can remember her parents were leaders in their predominantly black, Southern Pentecostal church. Pamela's family spent all Sunday in church and she enjoyed her participation in an active youth group. Gospel music was a big part of Pamela's life as she helped lead the praise & worship team as a teenager. So, Pamela was immediately drawn to Kuumba's repertoire of black sacred music. "It definitely reminds me so much of my church back home," Pamela explains, "These are the songs that I grew up on, that we sing in my church. Every time we're playing a new song, I'm

like, ‘Yes, I love this song! My mom sings this all the time.’ Or, [the song will be from] me and my mom’s [favorite] CD that we would jam to every time we were driving around.” At Pamela’s first rehearsal, it was the musical experience that initially gripped her. However, although Pamela enjoyed the music, it was her personal relationship with one of Kuumba’s members that led her to commit to the organization. Pamela concluded, “The people that really reach out to the new members are what make you stay.”

Of all of the different aspects of her experience in Kuumba, when asked to identify the most significant element of her participation, Pamela did not hesitate: “It would be the focus on the black community and black history, just because that’s one of the things I was really seeking in my life, and one of the things that I definitely thought, coming to Harvard, wouldn’t be here and I wouldn’t find.” Like many African-American students at Harvard, Pamela attended predominantly white schools throughout most of her pre-college education. In high school, Pamela served as the president of the black students association. Pamela came to Harvard with the intention of similarly investing her time in black cultural organizations. Because of her plans to attend medical school, Pamela realized that the prospect of spending a significant portion of her adult life in predominantly white environments added a sense of urgency to her quest to create black community for herself at Harvard: “In terms of extra-curricular activities, I was set on being around black people. That’s why my life now, all of my closest friends, all of my associates, [they] are all black; all my community involvements are [with] black organizations.”

As Pamela described her engagement in Harvard's black community in greater detail, she offered a perspective on Kuumba's role in the black community that neither Jennifer nor Elizabeth could offer because they did not share Pamela's connection to the other black student organizations:

Kuumba is part of the black community, but it's kind of not. It's so weird to me because if you look at the past, Kuumba is, like, the second oldest black organization. People in the past would definitely say, "Oh, black community: Kuumba." But now, it's not like that. And I don't know – I think it's because of, probably, the integration of the choir is maybe when it started to happen. Because I hear a lot of comments like, "Man, Kuumba's not black."

Pamela's description of the racial politics within Harvard's black undergraduate community echoes the assessments offered by Jennifer and Elizabeth. For them, Kuumba represents an alternative to other black student organizations, in part, as an escape from black students who would question the authenticity of their blackness. Pamela, however, does not feel the need to choose between Kuumba and the other black organizations.

Pamela identifies herself as one of the few black students living astride that chasm. I was curious as to whether or not Pamela agreed with the critique of Kuumba that she identified as being prevalent within the rest of the black community at Harvard. When I asked Pamela if she would change anything about Kuumba, she replied:

Oh, gosh. I feel like this is bad to say. Okay, if it were perfect for me, I would want it to have the same number of people, but have it be all-black if possible. And have it have more black men (or just, like, men in general because we're always recruiting for more men). Not to say that I don't like the diversity. But, I feel like maybe initially, coming in, I didn't. But over time, you know, I got desensitized to it and it was just like, "Okay, it's just something that is there." But, ideally, that's what I want.

I asked Pamela if the racial diversity of the choir inhibited her experience in any way, and she responded:

I just feel sometimes it's awkward. And that's what I really admire about Sheldon. Because he just still says whatever, which is great, which is one of the reasons why I stay and love it. Because he's very keen on, like, "Okay, this is still a black space. I'm still going to say how white America is racist and how it sucks." And I'll be glad he says that, but also feel awkward. But, yeah, there are probably things – there's just a certain way that I don't act. I'll still make little comments sometimes and be like, "Yes!" But, I feel like that's only when I'm in a row full of all black people and I kind of forget that [non-blacks] might be behind me. But, even then, I realize that, especially at Harvard, even if the choir was filled with all black people there's no guarantee that everyone will feel the same because at Harvard, especially, there's not so many what we call it now, "regular blacks," meaning from the U.S. [who] can't trace [directly] back to Africa. There's a lot of Africans and Caribbeans and different things. So, it's not even like everyone in the choir would have the same black experience as me. I'm mostly thinking of a black southern person from the U.S. That would be great if everyone in the choir could be that. But, that wouldn't happen.

Pamela seems to share Elizabeth's desire for Kuumba to maintain its historic role as a community in which black students can commiserate over their shared experience.

However, Pamela does not share Elizabeth's hope that such unity of experience exists within Harvard's ethnically diverse black population. Furthermore, the presence of non-blacks in the choir inhibits Pamela's ability to feel the same comfort of belonging that she feels so easily when she spends time with her all-black network of friends or when attending events sponsored by other black cultural organizations. Although Pamela respects and appreciates Reid's ability to behave in a manner that is consistent with his understanding of Kuumba as a black cultural space, the presence of non-blacks makes her feel "awkward" during these moments, which hinders her from fully enjoying the

emotional benefits of a space in which black people's experiences and black people's perspectives are privileged.

Given the significance of the racial composition of the choir to Pamela's experience in Kuumba, I wondered what her experience of "the race talks" had been. Pamela was eager to offer her recollection of the conversation that took place on her first Kuumba tour several years ago. Although this particular "race talk" opened some wounds for Pamela, it provided its own bit of healing as well. After having some "bad experiences" with white males in high school, Pamela cited an exchange that she had during the race talk as a critical turning point not just in her experience of Kuumba, but in her life:

A white boy was talking about how he's connected to Kuumba because he feels kind of like he has no culture. And then he also was saying how he's not even necessarily religious – which is another thing I was shocked by. Some people in Kuumba are like, "Oh, I'm not really religious." Or, they're of a different religion, which is so interesting. And then I was like, "Well, okay, I have a question. Seriously, when we're singing a song like 'Hold On,' for instance, that's a really emotional song for me. And sometimes I'm thinking about my own problems. But also, sometimes, I'm thinking about slavery and just how they were holding on and what they were going through. And, sometimes I just wonder what the other people are thinking about." For some reason it made him start crying and get emotional. And I definitely didn't mean that, so I started crying with him! And I was like, "No! I'm sorry!" But, it was such a great experience.

I feel like maybe he's been criticized for something like this in the past. Because he was saying, "Just because you're not from the [black] community, doesn't mean you can't feel." And he's someone who's very involved with "Breakthrough," this mentoring and tutoring program. And he started talking about that and how he loves his kids so much and during the summer he makes them do amazing things. They're acing their tests and everything. But then, during the year, they're back to having Cs and dropping out. And he was like, "I know how awesome they are. And when they need me, I wish I could be with them 24-7." And he was like, "I feel like people are telling me that if I'm not black, then my contribution isn't worth it." And since I had already made him upset, I didn't say

anything else. But someone else said what I was thinking, which was, “No, it's not worthless. It's definitely great and we need all the help we can get. But, there is an added value, too, when an actual black man is going into those communities.”

But I feel like a really important thing that conversation did for me was it made me more open-minded. I just really saw his sincerity and that helped me so much with how I look at white men or even white people in general. You know, like, they're not all racist.

Pamela refers to this conversation as one of the best things that has happened to her in her life, and certainly the best conversation she's had while at Harvard. However, Pamela did not characterize this particular conversation as a unique moment, but rather as an example of the many transformational moments that occur during each spring tour. According to Pamela, the process of building close relationships with other choir members while on tour changed her perception of what Kuumba meant in her life. Before tour, Pamela was drawn to Kuumba primarily by the music and the few specific people who had reached out to her and recruited her into the choir. “After tour,” Pamela confesses, “[Kuumba] was first and foremost about the community.”

I asked Pamela if and when this strong sense of community is evident when the choir is not on tour, and she immediately responded, “the Kuumba Circle!” Pamela sat forward in her chair and her eyes lit up as she described the practice:

I love it. So, at the end of every reversal we all join hands and we'll take praise or prayer requests. So people can share if something good has happened that the Lord has done for them that they want to praise. Like, “I aced that test,” “Financial aid is working out,” “Somebody got healed,” whatever. And then prayer requests for people that are sick, people that are struggling in any type of way. And if it's somebody's birthday, we sing the birthday song. And then we have a closing prayer. We pray for all those praises and prayer requests.

I think, for me, that's one of the best parts of Kuumba...because people share such personal things and you just feel that much closer to them. You can know what's going on with somebody's family. For me, I

just recently shared maybe a week or two ago about [a relative] having cancer...It was something that I wanted to say from the first rehearsal, but I was just nervous. And then I finally said it, and I just felt so much better. It's like a burden is lifted off of you, in a way. And to have people – you could tell that they care. And then, after, they'll come up to you and say, "I'm praying for you," and hugging you. And even the next rehearsals, they still remember and they're like, "How are you doing?" And it's just so good to have that support

Pamela had identified her friendship group as her primary black community because of their shared experience as "RBs" ("regular blacks"). Yet, when it came to sharing the most intimate details of her life struggles, it was in the Kuumba Circle and not within her circle of friends that Pamela found the common ground of shared experience on which to build relationships of mutual support. Additionally, these bonds of support were being cultivated within the context of communal prayer, through which the students invoke the presence and activity of God on one another's behalf. Pamela describes her experience of sharing a prayer request as a spiritual happening through which she feels the burden of her concern being lifted.

Contrary to the official stance that Kuumba is not a religious community, Kuumba is able to function as a substitute for church in Pamela's life precisely because its communal practices are patterned after the familiar Christian practices that have sustained her spirituality all her life. Reflecting on the year she did not sing in Kuumba, Pamela expresses her regret:

It was junior year and I had a lot of other commitments. I needed to focus on MCAT, stuff like that. But coming back this year, [I realize] taking that year off was just the dumbest thing I've ever done. While I'm here this year, I love it. But, I'm also thinking, "Oh, my gosh! I can't believe this is my last year to be with Kuumba." And I think people focus on the time so much, but it's like, 'What about what you're getting out of it?' And it's a steep commitment, but... I've just been going through things in my

life. I've always been going through issues, personal issues while here, and Kuumba has always had a different part in my healing for that. And I feel like whenever you really need Kuumba – I think that's why people stick with the commitment because, at least for this year, I try to go to every rehearsal. And if I have to miss a rehearsal, I'm actually really upset. And that has never happened to me before with Kuumba. It's like I'm leaning on it way more than usual and I don't know if it's because I feel like, finally, everything is kind of falling apart in my life. I think that if you're struggling, then being in Kuumba – when you actually use it as your healing place, the thing that rejuvenates you and gets you through your week – then, like, those three hours are nothing. They're not enough.

Kuumba's significance in Pamela's life is not rooted primarily in its identity as a black cultural community. Though there are elements of that impulse that she appreciates in Kuumba, Pamela finds more authentic "black" community elsewhere. Rather, Pamela's appreciation of and commitment to Kuumba are sustained by the transformational power of cross-cultural dialogue, the transcendent presence of the Spirit through the sacred music, the bonds of faithful companionship, and the healing power of God that she experiences through communal prayer.

"Michael"

Michael's involvement with Kuumba did not have the fairytale beginning that many Kuumba members fondly recount. Michael recalls attending Kuumba's winter concert and finding the whole experience underwhelming and undeserving of the hype. "It was nice," Michael remembered, "but, I wasn't moved." However, several residents of his dorm had found a home in Kuumba and repeatedly urged him to join them. Michael stated that his hesitancy to join Kuumba was due in large part to his fear that as an Asian-American and an agnostic, he would not be welcomed by Kuumba members. But, several weeks later when Michael was shopping in the campus bookstore, he heard

his name being called out from across the room. Michael looked up and saw the president of Kuumba walking over to greet him. “I was shocked that he knew my name,” Michael remembers, “The president saying ‘hi’ to me was really important because if people didn’t want me to be there, I wouldn’t be there. I mean, it’s obvious [that] as a non-black, non-Christian in an organization founded for blackness and sings all Christian songs [I might not be welcome]. But, then I was like, oh, okay. They’re okay with this.”

For Michael, his greatest personal attraction to Kuumba is its familial atmosphere. Specifically, Michael mentioned that he is a faithful attendee of the Kuumba dinners that take place before each rehearsal and he depicted the closing prayer circle as the most significant factor in the cultivation of the choir’s familial ethos:

A big part of it is actually the circle at the end, which at the beginning I was kind of uncomfortable with because I’m not Christian. But then you really get to just learn other people and realize that other people are people. They’re not just people who like to sing; but, people as people... So, what happens is at the end of rehearsal everyone goes to the circle around the room and hold hands. And it’s all very awesome. And there’s praise and prayer requests, which is when we go around the circle and people say – a limited number of people, not everyone – and they say, “this awesome thing happened” or “this bad thing happened” or “I need help with this,” that kind of thing. Then it’s closed at the end, typically, with someone praying. But, it [can] also be someone reading a poem or singing a song, which is my favorite kind.

Hearing Michael’s admission that he experienced some tension around this practice at the beginning of his tenure, I asked him if he had ever been explicitly challenged about his participation in Kuumba as a non-religious person. Michael replied that he had not until just recently. “On tour last month,” he recalled, “this one girl found out I wasn’t Christian. Her job [at her church] is as a missionary, so she was trying to, like, convert me. We had a conversation for a bunch of hours. And I was like, ‘Do you feel that me

being in Kuumba somehow degrades – or, is a problem?’ ‘Cause I can understand how it could be because she’s enjoying herself and, like, reveling in her faith and then she sees me as being hypocritical – saying all these things I don’t believe. But, she said it was okay. She thought about it, though [*laughs*].”

I was intrigued by the conversation that Michael had with the “missionary” choir member, which he remembers as having lasted for “a bunch of hours.” Michael elaborated:

So, at first we were just talking and she tried to get me to donate money to her church. And then in passing she asked, “Oh, by the way, are you a Christian?” And I said, “No.” And she was like, “Oh, well in that case...” Then she just asked a bunch of questions like, “How do you feel about being in Kuumba?” Not rude questions, just questions. Then she asked if I had ever done a praise or prayer request and I said, no, but that I actually thought of doing one when my mom got sick. But I didn’t. She said, “How do you get through this kind of thing without [religious faith]?” And I was like, “I don’t know. I just did. It just happened.”

Then, I told her that I read the Bible two summers ago. My roommate, who was also Christian, gave me one and I read it... My favorite book is Ecclesiastes because I think it's really well-written and I just like it. I kind of like Revelations too because it was so bizarre... I didn't really like Acts because Paul was kind of a douche – because he was like, ‘I'm so awesome and this is my doctrine.’ And I was like, ‘Who are you to say that all of a sudden you call yourself an apostle when you weren’t even down?’

She was disappointed. She didn't like my opinion of Paul because Paul was her favorite person. She said things that were kind of convincing. Like, she said, “Well, he didn't ask to be an apostle.” Then she said that she liked [Paul] because he is an example of how even if you turn away [from God] you can still be alright because he had been persecuting the Christians and then became an apostle. And I was like, “Okay.” She said there was a difference between reading the Bible and understanding it, which I agree with. Especially when you’re reading it cover to cover, it was more of an assignment for me.

The conversation ended with Michael accepting the missionary’s invitation to her church for a C.S. Lewis dinner, which is an outreach event that brings together Christian and

non-Christian college students to talk about the relationship between science and religion. I asked Michael how he enjoyed the dinner. He said he enjoyed the dinner very much but that "the four people at the table were history of science people, so we never talk about religion; we just talked about science."

Although this conversation is the only time when Michael discussed his religious difference directly with another choir member, Michael revealed that his own internal negotiation of the religious aspects of Kuumba was ongoing. Specifically, Michael was unhappy that the president started asking for volunteers to close the Kuumba circle "in prayer." In previous years volunteers were free to close the circle in prayer or with a poem or song. "What bothers me," Michael explained, "is not that people pray, but the assumption that people *have* to pray." Michael resented the notion that he could not determine for himself how to participate or even what meaning to ascribe to that participation. Michael claims that he is now comfortable adapting the religious aspects of Kuumba to his own worldview. He uses the moment of silence that opens the rehearsals as an opportunity to relax. He does not mind Reid's explanations of the biblical meaning of the lyrics, which he calls "the Bible according to Sheldon," because he does not feel compelled to adopt Reid's interpretations as a condition of his enjoyment of the songs. When Michael called the Kuumba circle "awesome" he described it as a time when he can get to know other choir members better. It does not bother Michael that for the majority of the members in Kuumba these activities are an expression of Christian faith. What comforts Michael and what makes his continued membership possible is his

confidence that those activities did not *have* to be expressions of religious faith in order for him to participate.

Despite the complexity of negotiating religious difference within the choir, Michael indicated that the choir's racial politics is by far the bigger issue for him to resolve internally. However, when I asked Michael if he wished that there were more Asian-American or other non-black members in Kuumba, he replied, "No. It would be weird if [Kuumba] was a microcosm of Harvard because it would not go with the mission." Michael then went on to point out that even though the choir is predominantly black, his experience in the group sensitized him to the diversity within the choir:

It's still primarily black, but you have different kinds of black people. You have Africans from Africa, different parts of Africa that I was never aware [of]. On tour we had a discussion about what it means to be black and apparently there's this split within the African and African-American community, between the immigrants and non-immigrants over affirmative action, which I was very surprised about because I didn't know [the dissention] existed.

While Michael appreciated the opportunity to learn about the various differences that exist within the black community, he stressed that the overriding ethos of the choir was one of unity. Michael observed that the unity among the black members in the choir created the family-oriented culture that made the group attractive to him in the first place. In turn, this family-like culture is also what compels the black members to embrace non-black members and adopt them as full members of the community.

As an illustration of the deep level of acceptance Michael feels in the group he recounts an anecdote from spring tour in which the president, when introducing the choir to an audience of school children, stated "as you can see, we're all black." Michael and

the one other Asian-American in the choir looked at one another and laughed, which prompted the rest of the choir and the children to laugh as well. Michael explained that he did not take the president's remarks as an indication of his invisibility, but rather as an affirmation that his presence had not compromised the group's identity as a distinctly black cultural space. In addition to this acceptance, Michael is gratified with the ways in which he has made himself at home within this black communal space. "When I hang with people in Kuumba," Michael observes, "I'm the only non-black person. But, I don't notice at all. At first I did; but, now I don't."

The Boston University Inner Strength Gospel Choir

Communal Identity

The Boston University Inner Strength Gospel Choir (ISGC) was born in 1973 when a small number of African-American students began gathering informally in their dorm rooms to sing songs from their shared black church tradition. Initially, the students sang gospel music together informally as a way of connecting with their culture and cultivating a safe community in the midst of a predominantly white campus that they experienced as hostile to black students. Soon, the group organized themselves as the West Campus Gospel Choir, named after the residential area in which their dorm resided. By the early-1980s, the choir jettisoned its geographically limited moniker in favor of its current name as the group's appeal extended to the entire campus. Around that same time, ISGC earned the support of the long-standing and influential president of the university, John Silber. President Silber's office provided funding for a professional

director under the auspices of Marsh Chapel, the university's home for campus ministries.

Although the ISGC musical director is administratively accountable to the Dean and music director of Marsh Chapel, the choir itself is a student-run organization governed by its own undergraduate executive board. The Boston University Student Activities Office (SAO) categorizes ISGC as a religious organization and provides the following description of the group:

Boston University's Inner Strength Gospel Choir is an award-winning, non-denominational, student-run organization devoted to glorifying God through song and praise. Established in 1973, ISGC is a diverse choir comprised of forty-plus members from all walks of life, with different experiences and beliefs. We come together each Sunday evening of the academic year to sing songs of thanks and praise to support and encourage one another in our daily lives.³

This description of ISGC also appears on the programs that audience members receive at ISGC concerts as well. Choir members describe ISGC using much of this same language. Among the definitions of ISGC provided by its members were:

“We spread God's word through music.”

“It's a choir with people from all faith backgrounds, but the songs we sing reflect the beliefs of the Christian Bible.”

“It's people in all paths of life, coming together to praise in their way of praising.”

“All-inclusive, loving singing group that worships.”

“It's a non-denominational choir that sings gospel music. But, it's also a family.”

³ <http://bu.collegiatelink.net/organization/innerstrengthgospelchoir/about>. Accessed November 30, 2012.

Although some of the members of ISGC described the group as a familial community, for the majority of the students I spoke with their experience was defined primarily by the activity of singing gospel music.

Unlike the Kuumba Singers, whose history figures prominently in their public relations material, ISGC is defined primarily by the role the choir plays in the lives of its current members. Although a passing reference is made in the official description to the choir's founding in 1973, public acknowledgment of the group's initial function as a home for marginalized black students is rare. The absence of this racial history in the group's public description of itself is consistent with the virtual silence on the issue of race within the choir's internal dialogue about its identity. The only manner in which race is ever referenced by the choir's members or leadership is in unqualified praise of the group's racial diversity. I learned from my interviews with the choir's music director and faculty advisor that racial division was the source of incredible tension within ISGC only a few years before the period of my research. However, this recent history of racial tension ever surfaced in any of the choir's public discourse.

While the members of ISGC have publicly made peace with the transition of its racial identity from "black" to "multicultural," the group does appear to be wrestling with the challenge that increased religious diversity poses to its identity as a distinctively Christian organization. Although the official description is careful to characterize the choir members as having "different experiences and beliefs," the statement of purpose contained in the choir's official Constitution reflects an understanding of ISGC's mission that is more explicitly Christian:

The purpose of ISGC is to serve as a home for meaningful, shared religious and spiritual experiences to students on campus; and to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, true Christian service, and fellowship within the Boston University community and beyond through the ministry of gospel music.

The statement of purpose reveals an evangelistic impulse that is not widely shared among the students with whom I spoke. On the other hand, a few members articulated an expectation that ISGC function as a context for Christian discipleship – a place where commitment to being a follower of Jesus Christ could be kindled, affirmed, and nurtured. Ultimately though, these differences of opinion with respect to what it means for ISGC to be a religious organization did not manifest themselves in explicit arguments among the membership. These negotiations over ISGC's Christian identity occur primarily at the level of internal self-reflection. For most members of ISGC, their participation in the choir is defined largely by their enjoyment of singing gospel music and the personal fulfillment they experience through their worship of God together.

Communal Practices

The Inner Strength Gospel Choir hosts three major events throughout the academic year: a Fall Concert, a Spring Concert, and the Annual Tour that takes place over four days during Presidents' Day weekend. In addition, the choir has become a fixture at several high-profile university-wide events including the annual Martin Luther King Jr. commemoration and Parents Weekend festivities. In recent years, the Dean of Marsh Chapel has sought to forge a closer bond between ISGC and the Marsh Chapel congregation by inviting the choir to sing for several Sunday morning worship services throughout the year. The choir meets once per week for rehearsal on Sunday evenings.

All of the music is selected and taught by the choir's musical director, Herb Jones, who is also responsible for assembling a band to accompany the choir for concerts and other engagements. Perhaps the most unique element of ISGC concerts is the use of choir members to introduce the song selections in lieu of comments from the musical director or from a master or mistress of ceremonies.

ISGC's Sunday night gatherings begin with an hour-long meeting called "Friends & Fellowship" (affectionately known as "F²"). According to the ISGC Constitution, the purpose of F² is to aid in the choir's spiritual development. The format of these F² sessions varies from week to week. However, they generally include an opening prayer, the singing of a few praise songs, and some activity or presentation intended to engage the choir members in discussion about living as Christians while in college. Occasionally, the discussion will revolve around the lyrics of the songs that the choir is learning. One of the more popular sessions involved educating choir members about the various sub-genres within gospel music. The sessions conclude with a prayer circle during which members are encouraged to share any good news that they would like to celebrate or any requests they may have for prayer regarding a troubling situation in their life. Following the closing prayer, the choir members make their way from the meeting room to Marsh Chapel for rehearsal.

Leadership of F² falls to the vice president, who may also recruit a Friends & Fellowship team. The vice president is also assisted by the choir's spiritual advisor, who is a Boston University School of Theology student serving as a Chapel Assistant on the Marsh Chapel staff. Choir members are required to attend at least five F² sessions each

semester in order to maintain their eligibility to sing in the concerts. This requirement has met with some resistance from the choir. However, the majority of the complaints that I heard regarding F² did not involve the content of the sessions, but rather pertained to members' annoyance at having to commit an extra hour of their time. Most choir members appreciate the concept of F² and have favorable reviews of the sessions they do attend.

Communal Culture

As with Kuumba, the communal culture of ISGC is significantly shaped by the form and character of the choir's rehearsals. Because ISGC rehearsals are preceded by Friends & Fellowship sessions, which are considered to be a mandatory part of the ISGC experience, the rehearsals themselves are not conceived of as opportunities for intentional community building or explicit education around the choir's mission. There are certain moments within ISGC rehearsals that appear similar to elements of Kuumba rehearsals, but that do not carry the same formational weight within ISGC as they do for the Kuumba Singers. For example, there is a break within ISGC rehearsals during which members of the executive board address the choir. However, while the board members of the Kuumba Singers often utilize this time to emphasize the importance of Kuumba's history or to educate the choir about the meaning of a particular song, the board members of ISGC generally use their time to share details about an upcoming engagement or to implore the choir members to follow through on an administrative obligation such as paying dues or fundraising for the annual tour. Another practice that the two choirs share is the circle prayer that concludes rehearsals. The difference here, however, is the length

of time devoted to the practice. For the Kuumba Singers, the closing circle prayer can last for 10 to 15 minutes followed by 10 to 20 additional minutes of follow-up conversation among the choir members. In contrast, because Marsh Chapel hosts a Catholic mass immediately following ISGC rehearsals, the choir is obligated to vacate the rehearsal space by a set time. While the leaders of ISGC consider the closing circle prayer to be an important practice that contributes to the life of the choir as a faith community, they expressed frustration at having to rush through the solicitation for "praises and prayer requests" from the choir members. There were times when the spiritual advisor attempted to include the prayer requests of several choir members within her closing prayer, but struggled to give the students' concerns the attention that she otherwise would have if not for the time constraints. On several occasions the spiritual advisor addressed the issue directly by advocating for more consistent attendance at Friends & Fellowship sessions and reminding the group that F2 is where choir members can more adequately attend one another through open sharing, discussion, and prayer. Thus, although ISGC rehearsals conclude with the same form of corporate prayer as the Kuumba Singers, in practice the activity did not carry the same significance in the experience of ISGC members as it did for the members of Kuumba.

Because the tasks of explicit group identity formation and intentional community building are outsourced to the F² sessions, ISGC members refer almost exclusively to learning and singing music when I asked them to describe their experience of ISGC rehearsal. This is not to suggest that the music rehearsals have no influence in the group's communal culture or in the way that individual members make sense of the

group's identity and mission. To the contrary, ISGC members described the rehearsals as having the most significant impact in the shaping of their understanding of and appreciation for their participation in the choir. Unlike the members of Kuumba, who often described the process of learning the music as a necessary means of achieving the greater ends of building community and performing the songs in concert, members of ISGC described the rehearsals themselves as the primary reason for their continued commitment to ISGC.

The overwhelming sensation that one feels when observing ISGC rehearse is one of pure enjoyment. Put simply, ISGC rehearsals are fun. ISGC members also describe these rehearsals as a "free" space, where the relative lack of structure and formality are a welcome break from what they consider to be the rigidity and the requirements of their academic routine. Accordingly, even a minor detail such as the lack of any formal beginning to the rehearsal helps to define the culture of the choir. "Fun" and "freedom" are not only descriptive categories; they are normative *values* that define the communal identity of ISGC, whose members repeatedly described the rehearsal experience as a haven away from the stress of the academic and social aspects of their collegiate lives. Thus, the values of fun and freedom do not connote frivolity.

When speaking to some of the board members, it was clear that this culture resulted in some challenges for the choir's leadership such as maintaining discipline and enforcing the group's administrative requirements. Most of the choir members I spoke with acknowledged the potentially negative consequences of the choir's culture of

freedom, but preferred that this freedom not be abridged lest the fundamental ‘stress-free’ character of the group be lost. One board member put it this way:

There’s a lot of work that has to be done, but I think the most important thing is that the choir members come and they don’t see it as this structured organization where they have to follow these rules. But they can just feel free to – like, feel free the way I felt [when I joined]. Like, if I knew it was gonna be this structured organization where I had to do “A, B, C, D, E” and I couldn’t do “A, B, C, D, E” and there was this structured format about how you’re gonna wave and how you’re gonna do your handshakes, then I would have been very frustrated because a lot of times groups are focused on structure and how it’s supposed to be and rules. But the thing I loved about ISGC was that it was so free.

For most members, including the executive board members, the joy and relief from stress that they experience during rehearsals is far more important than concerns over efficiency, propriety, or the appearance of professionalism.

Alongside the form and structure of the rehearsals, ISGC’s culture of joy and freedom is shaped by the nature of the music itself. The spontaneous and improvisational nature of gospel music drives the dynamism of the rehearsal experience. The dynamic character of gospel music is also communicated through the teaching style of the musical director, Herb Jones. Several of the choir members that I interviewed commented on Jones’ propensity for changing the arrangement of songs while teaching them, which they interpreted as an indication of the musical genius of Jones as an individual as well as the musical genius of gospel music as a genre. The choir members seemed genuinely amazed that Jones could spontaneously rearrange the music as quickly and as effectively as he did; and they were equally impressed that the music lent itself to that kind of freedom and creativity.

The free form of the choir's rehearsals and the improvisational nature of gospel music as a genre allow ISGC rehearsals to be a true embodiment of the lyrical content of the songs themselves. Rehearsals are not merely a time for the choir to prepare to fulfill its publicly stated mission of "glorifying God through song." Rather, that mission is fulfilled in the rehearsal itself. This is not to suggest that the entirety of ISGC rehearsals maintain the character of worship. However, because Jones chooses music that can be taught by rote, and because of his own modeling of an experiential engagement with the music through his playing and his directing, there appears to be a very thin line between practice and praise, between the ordinary and the ecstatic during ISGC rehearsals. Thus, the communal culture of ISGC as it is shaped in the rehearsal experience accurately reflects the statement of purpose in its Constitution of serving as "a home for meaningful, shared religious and spiritual experiences to students on campus."

To this point in my exploration of ISGC communal culture I have highlighted the significance of the activity of learning and singing gospel music in shaping the group's identity as a spiritual/religious community and I have downplayed the significance of those elements within the ISGC experience that are explicitly intended for that purpose such as the Friends & Fellowship sessions that precede the rehearsals and the circle prayer that concludes the rehearsals. I have done so in order to be faithful to the relative emphasis given to these various activities by the members themselves. When describing the significance of ISGC in their lives, the choir members consistently pointed to the personal fulfillment they experienced while singing together during rehearsals. They also consistently defined that activity as "praising" or "glorifying" God. When they described

their participation in ISGC as a source of strength and a reprieve from the stresses of their life, they credited the style and content of the music and not F² or the communal prayers. Even when describing the group as a "family," ISGC members did not associate that attribute with the formal structures intended to promote community. Instead, they pointed once again to the singing of music as having primary significance and ascribed their sense of community as being derivative of having shared the musical experience together.

Despite the marginalization of Friends & Fellowship and the closing prayer circle in the choir members' description of their own engagement in ISGC and its significance in their lives, I found that in practice those activities had a profound impact in preserving ISGC's identity as a distinctly Christian cultural space. Because many of the songs ISGC sings are written from a first-person perspective addressing God, they can be easily appropriated by choir members of various theistic faith traditions. Furthermore, Jones is careful to select songs whose themes are easily relatable to the college student population that comprises ISGC's membership and the majority of its audience. These themes include: hope in the face of adversity; joy in the midst of sorrow; the importance of love and kindness; the unconditional love of God in spite of human faults. Thus, the music of ISGC, though emanating from the black Christian tradition, communicates an ethos that I describe as 'come as you are, engage as you will.'

In contrast, the purpose of Friends & Fellowship is to aid in the spiritual development of the choir's membership, which implies a particular normative vision of what constitutes spiritual development. While no official doctrinal statement appears in

any of the choir's literature, the language that permeates the choir's discourse is thoroughly Christian and often identifiably "evangelical" (although not necessarily "conservative," nor exclusively Protestant). For example, many of the praise reports shared before the closing prayer at F² centered on choir members' success in getting a friend to attend church or "give their life to Christ." When discussing issues related to the moral dilemmas that face college students, the leaders of F² would often ask, "What does the Bible have to say about that?" This presumption of the authority of scripture was never questioned, problematized, or challenged openly. There is an acceptance on the part of the members that ISGC is a Christian organization whose mission is, in part, to "spread the gospel of Jesus Christ." Insofar as ISGC's communal culture reflects this aspect of its mission, it is embodied most definitively in F² and the closing prayer.

ISGC's communal culture retains a distinctively Christian milieu, but it does so ambivalently. This ambivalence towards the Christian identity and the evangelical mission inscribed in the group's constitution is reflective of the struggle by individual members to make sense of their own faith in the face of religious diversity. Christian members of ISGC fully appreciate the reality that ISGC is a context for authentic worship of God and deeper engagement in one's faith. However, the majority of Christian members also express a desire that non-Christian members of ISGC would find their experience equally as fulfilling without the need to convert to Christianity. And yet, this resistance against seeking the conversion of non-Christian ISGC members resides alongside praise reports from members who express gratitude over the Christian conversion of friends who are not members of ISGC. Although each member of ISGC

may not be internally conflicted regarding the conversion of non-Christians, the public discourse over the matter reflects this ambivalence and is, therefore, an important qualifier of ISGC's communal identity as a Christian organization with an evangelistic mission.

Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture

ISGC's identity and communal culture are influenced to a great degree by the choir's relationship to Marsh Chapel. First, because of the administrative relationship with Marsh Chapel, students who join ISGC do so with the expectation that they are joining a religious organization. This naturally leads to a self-selecting process whereby those who join ISGC are open to the possibility that their participation in this organization will include spiritual/religious experiences. Second, the physical space of the chapel itself greatly impacts the rehearsal experience. The architecture of the chapel contributes to the experience of transcendence as the high vaulted ceiling captures and amplifies the choir's already powerful sound, resulting in a feeling of being surrounded and overwhelmed by music that, having been offered as praise to God, returns as something greater than what the choir originally produced.

As a practical matter, the choir stands on the chancel steps in performance position while rehearsing rather than sitting in the pews. This arrangement eliminates the opportunity for choir members to engage in other activities such as homework or surfing the Internet, which enhances the focus on their collective experience. This rehearsal arrangement also requires that Jones structure his teaching in a way that sustains the choir's attention and energy throughout a long rehearsal on their feet. And as we have

already seen, it is precisely this sustained energy and continuous participation that allows ISGC rehearsals to be the embodiment of its mission rather than mere ‘preparation’ for its fulfillment.

With respect to the Christian character of ISGC communal culture, the major influencing factor is the degree to which the strong imprint of ISGC's previous director, David Coleman, still remains in the choir's culture. It was during the early part of Coleman's tenure in the early 1990s that the choir developed into a community of intentional Christian faith formation. Coleman describes the process this way:

One of the first big changes that we made was that I created the “Praise and Worship Hour.” Rehearsals were supposed to start at 7pm, so I suggested to the e-board that we start at 6pm and gather in the [student union] for an hour. We'd do a couple of praise and worship songs, we have a scripture reading, and we have someone lead us. At that time we had a spiritual advisor and we put it to them to do some work. We said, “Prepare a scripture, prepare a quick message, and have an open discussion about the passage and involve the choir members.” Members of the choir didn't have to raise their hand or participate or even pray. But they had to attend. It became a mandatory thing; I made it mandatory that everybody participate in this because it seemed to me that the gospel choir experience should be more than just learning notes and singing harmonies. There should be some education about what we're singing about and why, even if you're not a Christian.

The big reason I felt that way was because during our first tour in the spring of 1994 the major thing that happened was that about 17 people in the choir got saved one night while on tour. And it hit me over the head like a brick that this is not just about songs. People are receiving salvation and their lives are changing. Their lives are being turned around 180° through their experience in our tour. And these concerts and this process, this is not just music; this is power. And it was that very moving experience – the people in the choir getting saved – that the [executive] board and I took it upon ourselves to look at Inner Strength as more than just a choir. This is a ministry.

I wanted to continue to nurture what had already happened... So, when we came back from tour we had a big meeting and that's where the ideas of the change came from of how to approach Inner Strength. We started looking at it as more of a church than a choir, and a great vehicle

for introducing people to Christ. And, sure enough, countless letters and testimonies of people who joined Inner Strength not knowing whether or not they were saved, but making the commitment to Christ while they were in Inner Strength and often on that [annual] tour. And tour became like a crusade for the members of the choir. I saw a lot of people's lives changed around and it was very convicting and very powerful. But, we didn't try to save anybody. We just said, "Look, sing the songs, do the Bible study, have a spiritual advisor on hand in case something is going on with the choir, and we just move forward. And if God moves, then God moves." It was simple as that.

Although Coleman handed the directorial reins of ISGC to Jones in 2003, the choir has largely retained the basic structure that Coleman and the executive board established nearly two decades ago. While the "Praise and Worship Hour" was renamed "Friends and Fellowship" during the academic year prior to my field research, its stated purpose in the ISGC Constitution remains the same as when Coleman inaugurated it. The handbook that guides the vice president and the leadership of F² is still entitled, "The Praise and Worship Manual." Furthermore, the religious discourse within ISGC still reflects the language Coleman uses in describing the ends toward which these efforts were aimed – cultivating and nurturing Christian faith in the context of college life.

Despite the persistence of this structural template for intentional Christian discipleship, that aspect of ISGC's mission has come to be received with ambivalence because of the influence of the third contextual factor shaping ISGC's culture, which is the *perceived* increase in the membership's religious diversity. From the academic advisor and the musical director to the executive board and all of the members that I interviewed, they unanimously described the choir as a religiously diverse group of students and attributed the choir's recent reevaluation of the meaning and practical implications of its Christian identity and mission to this development. In response, the

leaders of ISGC altered their approach to the discipleship model that they inherited. Not only did they seek to lower the anxiety of potentially non-Christian attendees by rebranding the sessions with a new, less overtly religious name, but they also diversified the format by adding games, educational activities, and more open-ended discussions to a programmatic menu that previously only offered “Bible study.”

Despite the pervasiveness of the idea that the choir's membership contained an increasing number of non-Christians, the demographic survey that I administered indicated that the choir's membership was still overwhelmingly Christian. Of the 45 members of ISGC during the semester of my research, 33 completed and returned the survey. Of those 33 students, 32 identified their religious affiliation as "Christian," while one student identified as both "Christian" and "humanist." Anecdotally, after interviewing several members of ISGC who referred to having a Muslim friend in the choir, I discovered that they were all referring to the same person who had since left the group. When I later interviewed this student as a key informant, she stated that she believed she was the only Muslim student in the choir during her years as a member of ISGC. Likewise, when I asked several choir members if there were any Jewish students in the choir, they all offered the name of the same student, who had since graduated and was no longer a member of the choir. Overall, my investigation of ISGC's membership, both past and present, yielded very few confirmed examples of students who identified their religious affiliation as something other than Christian.

In my estimation, the weakening of the choir's communal identity as an intentional Christian community is a result not of the *perceived* demographic shift with

respect to religious affiliation, but in the *actual* demographic shift that occurred with respect to race. According to Herb Jones, the percentage of black students within the choir has changed from approximately 85% at the beginning of his directorship in 2003 to roughly 50% in the choir's present state. Jones' estimate was consistent with photographic evidence of previous concerts as well as my demographic survey of the current membership, of which 48% identified as "black." In talking with several of the seniors in the choir, they recalled that ISGC was a more tight-knit community when they were first-year students. They described what was then still called "Praise and Worship" as being a well-attended activity and a vibrant communal space where choir members supported one another and grew in their Christian faith tremendously. According to these students, as the racial demographics of the choir began to shift and the percentage of black students decreased, the commitment to intentional community-building activities, both formal and informal, decreased as well.

Although this dynamic is not part of the choir's current public discourse about itself, the choir's faculty advisor Katherine Kennedy, Director of Boston University's Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, confirmed that the racial politics within the choir had been a significant issue during the 2005-2006 academic year. Kennedy described the incident that sparked the crisis:

It all started when we were coming from a concert, I think it was at Stonehill College, and we were on the bus. It was done in a hurtful, but non-confrontational way. It started with one young lady saying how she had, the day before I think, that she had been to New York to see a play, a black play, a play that had an all-black cast and how wonderful that was. And from there she went on to say, you know, "But it's so hard for us to have anything that's our own. White people think that they can be a part of everything." And that's how it started, with her first praising this

extraordinary performance that she saw, and then [saying], “Why can't – why isn't the gospel choir like that. It used to be. It should be.” And so, the white students – it wasn't like she was quietly saying this to the person next to her. She was standing and talking to a group of black students and here are the white students sitting all amongst them. And so that's how it started. And then it continued to the point where [the non-black students] started feeling unwelcome and threatened, evidently, and just stopped coming.

Kennedy placed this poignant event within the broader context of the choir's transition from the directorship of David Coleman to that of Herb Jones:

When the new director came who was more of a traditionalist... the choir wasn't happy or receptive because they were used to the contemporary gospel. And of course, being students, they moved on and they graduated. Some left [the choir], but they mostly graduated.

As time moved on and the personality of the choir changed, I think the attraction to it changed the type of young person who came to sing. And it had really nothing to do with the music as opposed to the reputation that the choir had of being a welcoming and affirming community of students who you could find a family-like atmosphere with. And so, the choir attracted non-black students. But there were still some black students who felt that gospel music belonged only to them and started causing those rumblings within the choir, verbally voicing their dissatisfaction with the fact that there were non-black people in the choir. And it grew to a place where all but one white student left. I was very, very upset by that. And the one white student that stayed was determined that she would not be driven away. She was really a strong young woman and they really liked her as a person. And it really wasn't that they didn't like the white students, or even the Latino students. They just somehow felt, there were a few that felt as though this was something that black people should be able to hold onto all by themselves. And they forgot about the fact that this was supposed to be a Christian organization and that God loves all people. That part never even came into their thought process...

That group of students graduated and the following year the white students returned; the Latino students returned; they even got some Indian students. And all of sudden the choir started looking like the population of the campus. And they discovered that there were Christians in all different races and ethnicities. And so, we had Asian students who also joined the choir. And so, suddenly the choir was growing again. It was averaging 80 young people, and that's when blacks started becoming the smaller number.

Kennedy believed that the black students' disappointment with the choir's changing racial demographics was related to their dissatisfaction with the direction that Jones was taking the choir musically. The change in repertoire and the changing racial demographics combined to create a general feeling among the black students that the version of ISGC that they knew was fading away. As Kennedy states, the graduation of that class of leaders provided ISGC the ability to recover from the rift. However, this period initiated the weakening of ISGC's identity as a tight-knit community bound together by the presumption of shared racial and religious heritage.

Although the discourse that surrounded ISGC's community-building efforts under David Coleman focused primarily on an evangelical style of Christian discipleship, the practical importance of racial solidarity that ISGC's black members used to enjoy became apparent only when the arrival of an increasing number of non-black students threatened the continued existence of that solidarity. ISGC's leadership is now experiencing difficulty in maintaining ISGC's communal culture as a context for intentional Christian discipleship not only because of the impact of religious pluralism as a cultural value (if not a statistical reality), but also, and primarily, because of the loss of the choir's identity as an identifiably *black* Christian community. Thus, while the version of ISGC that emerged from this process maintains a strong sense of community, the center of gravity for that ethos has shifted away from the intentional community-building activities toward the shared experience of singing gospel music.

Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning

Director, Herb Jones

When David Coleman called Herb Jones in 2003 and asked him to consider taking over the directorship of ISGC, Jones immediately thought back to his own college experience. While attending Northeastern University, Jones spent a significant portion of his time at Concord Baptist Church in the South End of Boston. At that time, the gospel choir on Northeastern's campus had yet to be founded, so Jones fed his spiritual and musical hunger by singing with Concord's young adult choir. Yet, as important as his days at Concord Baptist Church were to his spiritual and musical development, Jones viewed the possibility of working with ISGC as an opportunity to contribute to a valuable experience that he felt he missed while in college.

One of the things that really caught my attention when I got here was remembering the fact that at Northeastern I didn't have an outlet for my spirituality, for my spiritual expression or any of that.. I had to go off campus and find that. And while it was a wonderful experience going off campus, the idea of being able to do that for somebody else, to provide something for someone else that I didn't have seemed appealing.

Jones' description of the college gospel choir experience as an outlet for one's spiritual expression resonates with ISGC's publicly stated mission to serve as a home for meaningful shared spiritual/religious experiences. Jones views his primary job as ensuring that the members of ISGC experience their participation in the choir as a communally shared divine encounter.

Jones utilizes the selection, the teaching, and the directing of the choir's repertoire as his primary tools for shaping the character of the ISGC experience. As an example,

Jones described his reasoning for beginning rehearsals with a ballad-like arrangement of “Oh Happy Day” rather than traditional vocal exercises:

That warm-up, actually, I borrowed from the choir that I first sang with back in Richmond [Virginia]... Within that song, within those lyrics are all of the vowel sounds that you should be producing through any song that you're going to sing... It's a great warm-up vocally. But also, once they start singing those words, it focuses their minds on what we're here for. This is not just a random get-together. There's a message we're going to be putting together; there's a message we're preparing.

According to Jones, roughly 80 to 85% of the choir's repertoire consists of songs that he either wrote or arranged based on biblical passages. The remaining 15% are songs by fellow gospel music composers that Jones has worked with over the years either in the Boston gospel music community or through his work with the National Convention of Choirs and Choruses – the first and largest national organization dedicated to promoting gospel music. Jones also expanded the choir's repertoire to include not only the various styles within the genre of gospel, but also at least one Negro spiritual per semester.

Jones reasoned, “You can’t talk about gospel without talking about the spirituals. It’s our history and our legacy. And if we don’t preserve it, then who will?” As Jones began to notice the arrival of students from other cultures, he expanded the repertoire even further to include at least one song in a different language in each concert.

Because Jones’ personal faith convictions and musical choices shape the choir members’ experience of ISGC to such a significant extent, I asked Jones to expound upon his understanding of the content and character of gospel music:

I would define gospel as speaking to the – well, I know [gospel recording artist and pastor] Donnie McClurkin says the gospel is the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I think I find that a little limiting. I would have to include the message of Jesus. And so what I usually select

as gospel might talk about the crucifixion, might talk about the resurrection. But, more often than not, it's going to be talking about the principles that Jesus taught, the life that he lived, the examples that he set, the enduring nature of that message, and the power of that message, the relevance of his message; to get to the experience of Jesus and whatever that may mean to anybody in the audience; to encourage them towards an experience with Jesus in however they want to define that.

As Jones spoke, I heard echoes of the statements the choir members made to me regarding their experience of the music they sing. In this view, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ is defined as providing others with an opportunity to have an experiential counter with Jesus that transcends doctrinal commitments and religious identity. Although this understanding of the gospel is thoroughly Christocentric, its vision of Jesus as a universal and all-embracing figure allows both the participants in the choir as well as the audience the freedom to interpret their encounter with Jesus as they choose.

It surprised me a great deal to discover how much influence Jones' interpretation of gospel music had on the way that individual choir members spoke about their experience of ISGC given that Jones did not regularly articulate his personal convictions during rehearsals. Yet, Jones revealed that he used to "preach" to the choir more than he does now:

I probably used to do it a lot more when the choir was more black, when there were more black students; one, because I was younger at that time and closer to the age of the students, but also because I knew the background that they came from and I knew that that was, kind of, what they expected. That was what they were looking for in terms of getting to understand the piece. Now, I think I do it a lot less; one, because of time; but, two, because I want to be careful of not necessarily [pause] – of the comparison [pause] – I want to be careful of not making something better or worse for somebody. But also because I'm evolving and what that song meant to me when I wrote it 12 years ago, even I'm beginning to see different things now as I play it, as I listen to what I wrote. And

sometimes I may tweak some lyrics from what I originally wrote it as now
I see that line differently or hear that line differently.

For Jones, the process of teaching the music and performing with the choir offers him the opportunity to experience his own fresh encounter with Jesus that requires him to be open to the possibility that the gospel message in the music might hold a different meaning now than it did when he first wrote it. Moreover, Jones felt more comfortable asserting his own interpretation of the music when the choir was populated predominantly by students who shared his own cultural and religious heritage. However, because of the demographic shifts with regard to the choir's racial composition, Jones no longer presumes to know and understand the interpretive lenses through which the various choir members will perceive the music. When the choir was predominantly black, Jones viewed his "preaching" to the choir as a contribution towards the choir's enjoyment of their shared religio-cultural experience. Without the certainty that his verbal interjections would be received in this way, Jones feared that they would be an imposition of his view onto the choir members and would, therefore, represent a violation of their freedom to interpret their experience of the music for themselves.

Although the cultural ethos of ISGC resembles the black church less than it used to when the choir had more black students, Jones acknowledges that the choir is still influenced by the black Christian tradition. Jones himself represents the black church tradition in his way of interacting with the choir. "Black church is who I am," Jones explains, "I don't know how to be anything else." Jones also indicated that ISGC's culture is powerfully shaped during the annual tour when the choir performs in black churches. Jones recounted the latest of such experiences:

When we were in Nashville a couple of weeks ago, the last service that we sang for was at a black Missionary Baptist church. It was a service that was geared towards college students, the college population. The church is right down the street from Tennessee State [University] and they do a one o'clock Sunday service for the students. It was packed with students from the school, but the experience was very much a black church, black Christian experience complete from the praise and worship at the beginning of the service to the preacher getting his "whoop" on, and the choir was loving it. They were loving the energy, they were loving the enthusiasm, the fervor of that experience. And I think they fed off of that for the time when they got up to sing. You know, there was all that energy building up. I think they soak that in and use that to, in fact, go forth with their ministry. So, I think that while the black church experience isn't innate in many of them, I think it's something that they respect, that they appreciate, and maybe in some ways aspire to, or to borrow from – to adapt.

Even in this description of the impact of the black church experience on the choir members, Jones is careful to correct his initial portrayal of the black Christian worship tradition from something that the choir "aspires to" to something that they "borrow from" and "adapt." This correction of his words is emblematic of Jones' general protectiveness of the freedom of the choir members to interpret their experience for themselves and not be pressured into mimicking artificial cultural ideals regarding what the gospel choir experience should be or even what the gospel message should mean to them. This is also one of the reasons that Jones insists on teaching the choir mostly original or unrecorded music. "Because we're not doing a lot of the regular top 40 gospel repertoire," Jones surmises, "students eventually begin to feel a different ownership of the choir and it becomes a very unique experience that they aren't going to find anywhere else." While the black Christian tradition is formative for the communal culture and identity of ISGC, Jones does not allow appreciation and adaptation to descend into caricature.

Ultimately, the goal of ISGC for Jones is that the choir members arrive at a personal ownership over their experience of the gospel through the music. Accordingly, Jones identifies the greatest significance of ISGC as emerging from those moments when their singing instigates transformative encounters through authentic worship:

Over the course of the semester, while I don't get to know everybody in the choir, there are people I do get to know. But, as I get to know people and I've known something about their background or their current situation, their aspirations, then I'll notice how people are responding or reacting in a moment of a song. Or, I'll be able to tell when a song has gotten to somebody, when a particular song is really speaking to somebody, and it's *their* song. And then either at one of the last rehearsals when we're doing a straight run-through or during the concerts, people will kind of explode when it gets to that piece, that point in that song when they become confident enough in the music and free enough in the moment to just let it be and to let it come out. And that can become contagious from one person, then another person, then another.

For Jones, ISGC has achieved its mission when students experience the songs as God's address to the uniqueness of their individual situations. Yet, what makes the experience even more significant is that this process is occurring in community with others who are similarly appropriating the song as their own. Thus, their interpretive freedom as individuals when understood as a shared experience becomes the basis for communal worship.

"Alice"

Alice considers ISGC to be the most significant experience of her time at Boston University. Alice defines ISGC as "a group of students who sing and praise about God and the gospel of Jesus Christ." However, Alice identifies ISGC's true value in her life as the "community that is behind the singing choir." Over the course of her three and a half

years at Boston University, Alice claims to have participated in at least two dozen student organizations and activities. In her experience, ISGC stood alone as the only "true community" among the campus organizations. Alice based this assessment on ISGC's "incomparable" ability to fashion a unified community while still valuing and accepting the different backgrounds and the uniqueness of its individual members.

Alice's perception of ISGC was cemented during her very first rehearsal nearly 4 years ago. Everything that she loves about ISGC was on display that first Sunday night:

It was really scary. I think I was the only Asian there. Actually, I might have dragged one other girl with me – Mary. You know, she stands next to me [during rehearsal]. She's another Asian girl, and I was like, "Come on! There's no auditions!" We both signed up and I dragged her out.

When we got there, I was so petrified... We started singing and there were no papers, no lyrics, which was different [for me]. But, I mean, I love black music and I love singing. So, the whole singing part was, like, I loved it.

And there was something weird because it wasn't like singing just, like, a love song. You had a weird feeling. I realized it was more than just singing. It was this weird feeling that's hard to explain. But I had never felt that before because I was never really religious. I remember that first Sunday that, at first, I felt really, really uncomfortable. And I was like, "Oh, God! I'm gonna make a fool of myself. What am I doing here?" Then I realized that everyone, when I looked around, everyone was feeling that connectedness in their faces and they look so uplifted from the songs. And I was like, "Okay, so I'm not the only one that's feeling this euphoric sensation. There is something really special about this place that I've never seen."

I really wanted that family. And I remember when I first went in we always ended with a prayer. That was not something I've ever done with a group of 60 or 70 people. And they always emphasized, since the first day I went, "We are a family. This is a different group. We come from different paths, but it's a family at the end of the day. We're bound by one God's love." And I think for me that was such a security blanket [because] my family was all the way back home. I loved hearing that. I loved hearing that I was part of something that I just joined regardless of what path I came from. And while I was there I felt like I was connected with everyone next to me even though we all looked different. I was

petrified. But by the end I left feeling – and Mary, too – we both were like, “Okay, we’re in for good.” She's never left and I never left.

Alice credits her participation in ISGC for helping her develop a relationship with God.

Although Alice’s mother is a Christian, Alice claimed that she had never made a personal connection with God and even doubted God's existence. However, her experience of "euphoria" while singing gospel music along with the love and acceptance that she experienced as a member of the ISGC community were both very important in sustaining her emotionally as she coped with the difficult transition to college life. Alice stated that because members of ISGC attributed both these euphoric feelings and their loving community to the presence and activity of God, she began to put "more serious thought and consideration" into her spiritual beliefs and eventually made a commitment to “follow God's path for [her] life.”

Alice’s association of her spiritual development with her ISGC experience was curious given that she had also been involved with Asian-American Christian Fellowship (AACF) on campus. Alice explained that she joined AACF primarily for social reasons as the group hosted many social activities that allowed students of Asian descent to develop close relationships and celebrate their shared cultural heritage. However, as Alice became more involved with AACF she became increasingly disillusioned with the ministry’s approach to Christian evangelism and discipleship:

My biggest pet peeve about Christianity was that AACF – they say “non-denominational” and they say it's open for everyone, but it really isn't because it's so hard for someone of a different background to even be a part of that group. The main difference [from ISGC] was [that] InterVarsity was about converting people to Christianity. Their sole goal at the end of the day was how many people are actually “seekers” and how many people became “believers.” I was having internal struggles with

numbering people into a category. That was something that really irritated me and that's one of the reasons why I decided to leave. It was something that was commonly discussed. It was almost as if someone was being targeted so that they could be converted to being a Christian.

And I think that so many college campus ministries are so focused on, "How can I convert you to become a Christian? How many events can I drag you to so that you become a Christian person?" And that was something that, really, I felt that it was so out of our power. I don't know how many people in the world can be convinced to give their lives to Christ just because there was someone that dragged them to church. If that was the case then everyone would be a Christian by now. I would've been.

I personally felt that no person had the power to change someone that way. I just believe that that's something that God plans on His own time and that no matter how many times I want this person to become Christian, if it's not God's plan right now that's never going to happen. And I didn't want to see it as a 'success' or a 'failure.' I try so hard as a person to not see someone with labels; so, that was my biggest pet peeve AACF.

Alice's distaste for AACF's approach to evangelism stemmed from her own reflection on how her mother's failed efforts to instill Christian faith in her through church attendance as a child. Alice felt that the binary categorization of people as either "seekers" or "believers" did not reflect the reality of her own nonlinear, complex, mystery-filled journey toward a commitment to Christian discipleship. Not only did the AACF approach to evangelism mischaracterize the nature of faith formation in Alice's estimation, it also misplaced the primary agency for spiritual transformation on the actions of human beings rather than the movement of God.

In contrast, Alice praised the way that ISGC provided a context that was far more conducive to cultivating nascent Christian faith:

I think ISGC is a really good first steppingstone for someone who's very new to their faith to really feel comfortable with what they believe in or [to ask], "Who is this God thing?" You know, a lot of those questions. It's a safe and friendly environment as opposed to a church where it's very

heavy. You have a pastor up there and you feel very much like, “Oh, I’m with all these people who believe in the same thing.” Whereas, in ISGC, you’re like, “They’re just here to sing. Who knows what they believe in?”... This sounds so cliché, but it’s like a true brotherhood and sisterhood of people of different backgrounds being able to come together as just broken people and not as whatever else people usually categorize us as. I’ve realized, in college, that’s been really rare to see because usually it’s easy for people to just stay in their comfort zones and maintain the easier social norm. But I think ISGC really embraces that everyone has very individual parts and individual uniqueness and we can all come together regardless. Some people have different religions, even, in the choir. But the fact that they decide to stay is because we’re not – because we can really embrace the uniqueness and come as just people, not as a black Christian person or an Asian Christian person or Catholic person. It’s just a group of people who, kind of, believe.

For Alice, AACF’s categorization of people according to their particular level of Christian faith commitment or lack thereof compromised the credibility of their community’s claim to be open and welcoming. In contrast, it is ISGC’s lack of attention to the religious/spiritual identity of its members that allows the character of the community to remain truly welcoming. For Alice, this true welcome becomes the basis for experiencing loving relationships among choir members and represents a more credible embodiment of Christian community than the programmed approach of AACF. Thus, by not aiming to convert persons to Christianity, Alice believes that ISGC actually provides a context that is more conducive to the exploration of Christian faith.

Alice stated that the effectiveness of ISGC as a context for Christian discipleship has been challenged in recent years as the choir’s membership appears to include fewer church-going members. As evidence of this change Alice points to the more outwardly reserved ethos of the choir during rehearsals as well as the decline in attendance at Friends and Fellowship sessions:

The choir definitely has changed in terms of demographics, in terms of their spirituality. I remember my freshman year there were a lot of church-going choir members. And so, there were a lot of people who already had a strong foundation with their relationship with God. They felt comfortable either expressing or singing, like, praising God in public. And the past few years, there's been a lot of people who either don't go to church or didn't grow up attending church... And they, kind of, tend to stick on the more reserved side in terms of public displays of affection, you know, praise. And so that's been kind of different. Also, my freshman year when I went, the whole Friends and Fellowship thing was very big. People were always coming. We had no requirements, but that was still the main place to go. We were always talking about how that was a place where we could share our fears and prayer requests and praise reports and all that stuff. That really died down my sophomore year and junior year. The current juniors and seniors of ISGC all remember that, that time when it was really, really big.

As discussed above, I suggest that the demonstrable change in ISGC's communal culture with respect to its spiritual/religious character is due to the decrease in black membership. If my theory is correct, then Alice's observation of the decrease in "public displays of affection" toward God could be explained by the decline in the number of students whose spirituality is shaped by the black Christian worship tradition, one of whose attributes is outwardly demonstrative praise in many (though not all) black churches. Second, the decline in attendance at F² could be explained by the fracturing of the cultural solidarity among ISGC's predominantly black membership which had previously bolstered the choir's community-building activities.

Although Alice highlighted the way her own status as a racial minority within the group posed no barrier to her full inclusion and acceptance, she revealed that not only was the decline in black membership the subject of her own reflection, but that it had also been a part of the choir's public discourse during her tenure:

When I first joined [ISGC] it was predominantly African Americans and it was more – or, at least I was told – before Herb came, the previous musical director was more focused on [contemporary] black gospel music and that was the main genre that the choir sang... But, I know when I joined we did sing different songs, although the choir was predominantly still black and it was the more traditional “gospelly” kind of feeling. As the choir changed, I think they – especially the older upperclassmen – felt like the identity of a gospel choir that was in their head was being threatened almost... I don't really know how they felt, but I think that some people were not as accepting because they felt as if the definition of ISGC or the definition of gospel choir or gospel music was being threatened.

But more recently, I think it's really interesting because what we face is good and bad. It's good in the sense that it's really unique and really challenges people to think outside of what their perception or identity of a gospel choir is supposed to look like. But it's also hard in the sense that many people are so new to gospel music. So, it's hard to educate when so many people, or the majority, don't know what it's supposed to look like... So, I think that although we should embrace our uniqueness, I think it's really important to recognize the history and recognize the roots of where it comes from.

While Alice acknowledges the displeasure that black students felt with the evolution of ISGC, she restricts her analysis to the change in the choir's repertoire. Alice does not seem aware that black students also expressed dismay at the loss of ISGC's former communal identity as a definitively black cultural space. Yet, Alice's own experience of having been embraced into ISGC as an Asian student when the choir was still predominantly black is evidence that the racial solidarity those black students enjoyed did not inhibit the inclusive welcome that Alice describes as the core of ISGC's significance. Furthermore, although Alice does not make this connection explicitly, the years when she experienced the choir as predominantly black coincide with the period of time during which she describes the choir as having the greatest commitment to the formal discipleship meeting and the most outwardly demonstrative engagement with the music.

Alice's experience demonstrates the importance of the black Christian tradition in the communal life of ISGC and the threat that disconnection from that tradition poses to the group's identity and culture. Alice is at pains to disparage the choir's increased racial diversity in any way because it symbolizes the triumph of the inclusiveness that most fundamentally defines ISGC as an authentic Christian community. However, in her final analysis, Alice acknowledges that the choir's increasing racial diversity represents a serious challenge to its ability to sustain the aesthetic vitality and familial ethos of the black Christian tradition that are so critical to the health of the practices that constitute the ISGC experience.

"Ola"

Ola describes joining ISGC as the best decision she made in college. Ola was raised in church by devout Anglican parents who migrated to the United States from West Africa. She describes her household as "very religious, strict, and morally-driven." However, by the time Ola entered BU, a series of personal tragedies had severely shaken her faith in God. "I didn't see the point in praying," Ola remembers, "because the person I was supposed to be praying to had let all these things happen to me." Ola credits her attendance of the ISGC fall concert during her freshman year as the catalyst that reawakened her spirituality:

So, I went to their first concert in the fall and it took my breath away. It wasn't only the lyrics, but it was just the fact that there were so many different faces in the choir... I saw people from my pre-med classes, people in grad school, and my best friend was there. The fact that they're all singing and so into it – I was like, "I can't believe people are able to do this and just be one big group and have a spirit come over them." I was like, "I want that."

Hearing them all singing and seeing that they were all from different backgrounds. I know that they all believe in a higher power, but it's not like Jesus, himself. It's just their own version of some other higher power. Some people could be singing to Mother Nature; some people can be singing to their mom and then just filling in the words with what they believe is their ultimate being or something like that. And it was just something where I was like, "Wow, okay this is different."

The fact that they were like, "You don't have to be a religious person to be in the choir," I was like, "Perfect." That way I can just sing about [my problems] but not really have to devote everything to, like, religion and to God and everything – which I do, now. But back then, I just didn't think I had to.

Ola claimed that ISGC's nonconformity to her image of what a gospel choir would look like was important because she had built up such a resistance to anything resembling organized traditional religion. The realization that membership in ISGC did not require fidelity to a particular religious tradition opened Ola to the possibility that joining ISGC could provide her a safe space to re-discover her spirituality at her own pace and on her own terms.

Upon joining ISGC, Ola found that her participation in the weekly rehearsals exceeded the expectations set by her concert experience. Ola describes the way that ISGC rehearsals have become a critical component to sustaining her well-being:

For that two-hour block, people just come and socialize and sing and just unwind, while also singing gospel music. And there's certain messages that are in the music, but there's also messages that Herb, our director, will just say to you. And it's just like, "I would've never gotten this message if I had not come to this two-hour Sunday meeting." It's honestly just an outlet – you're released from school; you released from your stresses; you're released from your friends just nagging you about this, that, and the third. There's no pressure to do certain things. You're just there singing. And I believe in chakras. You have nine different chakras in your body and one of them is your voice – being able to just release so much energy from singing or from yelling... Some people would choose to go out and scream into an open area and, like, feel better. That comes from singing in the gospel choir for me.

While Ola enjoys talking with friends before and after rehearsal, the most important aspect of her participation in ISGC is the act of singing gospel music and the positive impact that this activity has on her state of being. Ola confirms the importance of the free form of the rehearsals ("there's no pressure") and the general simplicity of the structure ("you're just there singing"). Ola's use of the concept of chakras to explain the spiritual significance of singing indicates that her spirituality incorporates concepts from outside of the Christian tradition even as she embraces the Christian message contained in the lyrics of the music ISGC sings.

When Ola first joined the choir, she was attracted by the opportunity to share in a spiritual experience without having to define that experience as an encounter with God, since she was no longer certain of God's existence. However, Ola credits the gospel music that she sang in ISGC with restoring her faith in God. Given the importance of this music in the reshaping of her spiritual life, I asked Ola to describe ISGC's repertoire:

Our music is upbeat with a clear-cut message. Like last year, for our concert the last song in the concert was called, "Whatever He Promised," and the main part says, "Whatever He promised, it's already done." That line alone – I just love that part. And Herb has a tendency of picking songs that if sung in any type of manner, you will get this message. You will walk away with a clear-cut message of what he wanted you to understand about God or about the Bible or about something that has to do with religion... Last year's message was that whatever you need or whatever you have in mind for yourself, God already has it done. You just need to go down that right path and get there. And, you know what? God's gonna help you get there, so don't worry about it. It was more of just, "Ease your mind, God's on your side" type of message. And this year, one of the songs that we sing is "Siyahamba," which is an old African song. And it's a message of – you may be going on in life thinking that you're alone, thinking that you really have nobody on your side. Just look up; God's right there. Or, just look to your side and God's right there. Look to that side, God's right there. Or, look into yourself

and God's right there. I guess the main message that [Herb] always tries to send is that God's always right there by your side and to not fret about much.

Through her participation in ISGC, Ola experienced a dramatic reversal in her relationship with God. Ola previously doubted God's existence; now, she felt a deep assurance of God's presence in her life, and even inside of herself. Ola went from feeling abandoned by a God who allowed tragedies to abound in her young life to being convinced that God is actively working for her good. Ola directly credits ISGC's music with enabling this spiritual development.

ISGC has been a powerful context for the reconstruction of Ola's once broken spirituality not only because of the message in the music, but also because of her relationship with other members. Ola describes her experience of spiritual community in ISGC this way:

We do have a very family-oriented relationship, in a sense. Like, I know that I'm able to go to about 4 or 5 choir members if I really need somebody to talk to and I know that they can go to a bundle of people. It's in this little group that we found a sense of comfort, the fact we can come to choir and sing about stuff. And then after choir, we're still able to talk about the problems that we have at home. We don't have to keep it only about choir. I can come to them and say, "I seriously struggle with my faith" or "Can you go over something in the Bible with me to make it a little bit more understanding to me?" or "I don't understand this whole praying at the end of choir thing. Do we really have to do this?" or "Praise and Worship isn't working" – well, Friends & Fellowship is what it's called now – "Friends & Fellowship isn't really working for me. Is it possible that we can just talk about stuff outside of Friends & Fellowship?" We have that sort of dynamic where you can always – there's like an alternative way to talk about things and bond with each other. But, we always bring in some form of religion into it. We always bring in the fact that if I can't help you with this problem, I know somebody who's always going to be there, which is God.

That's one thing that me and my friend in choir always do, we always relate it back to one of the songs that we talked about, that we sing

about in choir. Like, whatever we talk about at the end of the day, we always – like, last year for example. I was having problems in school and I went to her and I was talking to her about it. And I was also having the same issues with religion. And I was like, “I really don’t know how I’m gonna be able to stay focused and prepare for this concert and do all of this.” And she was like, “Well, whatever He promised, girl, it’s already done.” And she tied it right back into gospel choir and I was just like, “Oh, okay. That just makes so much more sense. Thanks.” Like, we’re able to have those kinds of conversations because we’re all in the choir and because we all have some sort of understanding of choir. We have an understanding of each other because we’re in that choir.

When describing the “sense of comfort” that Ola feels among her fellow ISGC members, she still cites “the fact that we can come to choir and sing about stuff” as the primary reason for the choir’s familial ethos. Then, when linking the rehearsal experience to any explicit relationship building that does take place, Ola refers to the informal conversations that take place after rehearsal instead of the intentional conversations that are built into the Friends & Fellowship sessions before rehearsal. The only time Ola mentions ISGC’s formal community-building tools – Friends & Fellowship and the closing prayer circle – she does so to express her dissatisfaction with both practices. To be fair, Ola explained that she was referring to her displeasure with the old “Praise and Worship” format and that she enjoyed the changes that had been made. Although Ola describes the spiritual advisor as “relating everything back to the Bible,” she distinguishes the current way that the Bible is engaged from “forcing the book down your throat, which is what they were doing last year.” Still, even given her approval of the new Friends & Fellowship sessions, Ola disagrees with the board’s decision to make them mandatory, stating that “some people just don’t need it to be able to understand the gospel choir.” Ola uses her relationships in ISGC as opportunities to engage in

conversations about the Bible and its message for her life; she just does not view Friends & Fellowship as the venue for such conversations. As for the prayer circle, Ola's gets frustrated with members who ask for prayer regarding issues that she feels are beneath God's assistance. "Little minor things," Ola explained, "I'm sorry, but I'm not praying with you for that. If someone is sick, then I understand." So, in the end, Ola does not point to ISGC's formal faith development program as the drivers of her sense of ISGC as a spiritual community. Instead, she points to explicitly faith-related exchanges that take place between her and fellow ISGC members that, while instigated and made possible by their mutual participation in ISGC, occur outside of the formal communal structure of ISGC. Her final example, that of her friend's encouragement to her during a difficult time, once again brought the focus back to the way that the music of ISGC provides the substance of the choir's spiritual impact on its members.

Because the activity of singing gospel music is the basis of Ola's personal spiritual development as well as the basis of her understanding of ISGC as a spiritual community, her overall experience of ISGC is not negatively impacted by her relative dissatisfaction with the group's formal structures and activities for community-building and discipleship. Ola claimed that a similar dynamic was at work when I asked her if the decreasing black membership in the choir had any impact on her experience:

When I first started coming to the gospel choir, which was freshman year, it was heavily African-American, but with other groups represented as well. And then, over the years, it's become less African-American – actually, I wouldn't say less, because the number of people have increased – but, less predominantly African-American and more of an equal distribution of every race. But, no one really pays attention to it. People just come in and sing and they disregard the fact that the person I'm standing next to is white, the person I'm standing next to is black. No one

really focuses on that fact. You just come to do a job, which is sing and just have fun.

Ola quickly dismissed the suggestion that the racial makeup of the choir bore any significance for the members of the choir. In fact, Ola praised the demographic shift for making the choir more of a representation of the campus at large. However, I decided to probe the issue further by asking Ola what would happen if the choir became even less black. Her answer to my hypothetical question revealed that Ola was managing a much more complicated internal struggle regarding the racial identity of ISGC than she initially intimated:

Inner Strength is known for having very soulful, attitude-driven songs. And if there's not enough people who have that soulful attitude, you're just like, "This is not the choir that I joined before." And it's sad to say, but I would kind of agree that if I went to choir and I didn't see that many black people I would say, "This is not the same choir I was in two years ago. This is different and I don't really know what to do now." And I guess, like, the comfort level would change.

Ola does not point to ISGC's formal faith development program as the foundation of ISGC's communal culture as a spiritual community. Instead, she points to meaningful exchanges between her and her close friends in ISGC that, while instigated and made possible by their mutual participation in ISGC, occur outside of the formal structure provided by the choir.

Since Ola's sense of community in ISGC was so dependent on these close friendships that she formed when the choir was predominantly black, I wondered whether the shift in the choir's racial composition over the last few years had any impact on Ola's experience in ISGC. Ola's response revealed a complicated internal struggle regarding the racial identity of ISGC:

I guess the black factor was pretty big for me when I started choir, and the fact that it's changing – I'll admit, it did change my attitude a little bit. But I'm kind of accepting the fact that there's more white people in choir, there's more Asian people in choir. It set me back a little when I first came back from [summer break] and there was not the same amount of black people there. And I was like, "Why? This choir's changing completely." ...I guess the comfort level changes if it's not a predominantly black choir because there are certain things that I would be able to say in choir. I would be able to joke about a lot more things if there were more black people, as opposed to if I were to do it and there's, like, an Asian girl next to me. I feel like they wouldn't get it and, therefore, my demeanor in choir would change as well. And now that I think about it, that just sucks [*laughs*]. It's a sad fact that I would do that. It's depressing [*laughs*].

When the choir was predominantly black, Ola could depend on a certain level of shared culture and, subsequently, an unspoken and assumed solidarity with other black members in the choir. However, because the communal culture of ISGC has not been cultivated around its historic function as a social haven for black students, Ola felt badly about harboring these feelings of discomfort. Ola's hesitance to discuss the issue conveyed a sense that even articulating these inner thoughts represented a betrayal on her part of what she believes to be ISGC's mission and purpose, which she had elsewhere defined as "glorifying God." Moreover, ISGC's racial diversity is an important component of its culture as a community that embraces difference. So strong is this understanding of ISGC in Ola's mind that she describes having any feelings to the contrary as "sad" and "depressing." Although she used these terms with a smile and a hearty laugh, it was evident that Ola struggled to acknowledge her own longing for ISGC to recover its identity as an intentional, though not exclusive, black communal space.

Despite Ola's admission that her comfort level in ISGC has been negatively impacted by the increasing racial diversity, she insists that the impact on her overall experience is negligible. Ola professes:

I still love the choir. The main thing that's made me stay is the music that we sang and the comfort that I get from singing with the group. The small factor that there's not that many black people hasn't really bothered me. I mean, I have gotten a little bit quieter in the choir, but it hasn't been a significant change. When we go on tour, I'm still the same bubbly person. We still have the same impact on people. Like on tour, when we spoke to children they still loved us. Herb still adores us. It's just that small little factor that there's not that many black people there. So, I would say that nothing's really changed. I still love going to choir. I still love staying afterward a little bit and just talking to people. I still look forward to choir every Sunday, but there's just that small little piece that they're not there. And I'm not affected by it because I still go back, and I still come home with a smile on my face.

The Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir

Communal Identity

The Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir is unique among the three HBCGCs under consideration in this project. Although Third Day does make use of a student leadership board it is not a student organization. Instead, participation in the choir is offered for academic credit through the Tufts University Department of Music as "Music 72-01: Gospel Choir." The Kuumba Singers wrestle with the meaning of their identity as a black community in the face of racial diversity and ISGC struggles to reinterpret its commitment to Christian ministry in the context of religious diversity. As a music department performance ensemble, Third Day bears neither burden and is viewed as an opportunity for students to learn about gospel music as an artistic and cultural phenomenon through experiential education.

Aside from its communal identity as a class and not a student organization, Third Day is also unique within this study because of the relationships that its director and some of its members have to the other two choirs. David Coleman, who directed ISGC from 1993 to 2003 and whose legacy still looms large in the communal life of that choir, is now “lecturer of music and ensemble director” for the Third Day Gospel Choir. Meanwhile, for the past five years a number of Tufts University students have been singing for both Third Day and the Kuumba Singers concurrently. Although I interviewed Coleman in his capacity as the director of Third Day, he naturally explained his approach to leading Third Day in comparison and contrast to his directorship of ISGC. Likewise, when I spoke with students who were members of both Third Day and Kuumba, their reflections on both groups shed light on the differences and similarities between the two experiences. Thus, my examination of Third Day through the eyes of David Coleman and these dual-membership students greatly enhance the study’s comparative quality.

Communal Practices

Participation in Third Day is open to all Tufts University students regardless of academic major. However, students must audition and receive permission from the course instructor, David Coleman, prior to enrolling in the class. Coleman gives priority to returning students and grants enrollment to new students on a first-come, first-served basis. The auditions are merely a means of assigning students to the appropriate voice section. Once enrolled in the course, the students attend a weekly rehearsal for two hours on Friday afternoons from 3:30 to 5:30pm. During the weeks leading up to a

performance, additional sectional rehearsals are required throughout the week for which the students also register to ensure that they do not conflict with other classes. The students receive a packet at the beginning of each semester containing the lyrics to each song being performed at the concerts. Aside from these lyric sheets, choir members are provided no other written material and must meet no further requirements beyond rehearsal attendance. The choir generally performs three times per year—a concert at the conclusion of both the fall and spring semesters and a short performance during Parents' Weekend. In addition to these annual performances, Third Day embarks on a traveling tour once every three years.

Participation in Third Day entails very few activities beyond these scheduled rehearsals and concerts performances. Members of the executive board meet for 30 minutes following each weekly rehearsal and section leaders meet periodically with Coleman to receive instruction for running their small group rehearsals. The one extra-curricular activity open to all members is a community service opportunity that Coleman introduced as an option to deepen choir members' engagement with the spirit of the music they sing. Coleman also supports alternative, student-initiated choir activities. For example, several years ago a student expressed a desire to form a prayer group. Coleman advertised the existence of the prayer group during rehearsals and provided counsel to the student who organized the group. However, the group was sparsely attended and did not survive the graduation and departure of its organizer. Thus, participation in Third Day is, for the most part, limited to the weekly two-hour rehearsals.

Communal Culture

The atmosphere surrounding Third Day rehearsals is that of a social happening. As one enters the Perry and Marty Granoff Music Center – the newly constructed, state-of-the-art home of the Tufts Department of Music – the sun-drenched atrium is abuzz with the chatter from the mass of students. As the choir members line up to sign the attendance sheet on their way into the Distler Performance Hall, where Third Day rehearses, the scene resembles the lines that form outside popular dance clubs more than it does the prelude to a choir practice. Upon entering the performance hall, one is further overwhelmed by the size of the choir as the choir occupies the majority of the 300-seat auditorium. The size of the choir indicates its significant popularity and confirms what the air of excitement in the atrium could only suggest – this is the place to be.

As students enter the rehearsal space, they are greeted by Coleman playing his keyboard with accompaniment from a live electric bass and a full drum kit. The sound in the acoustically impeccable performance hall is professional and powerful. Having been treated to this overture, the choir members do not have to imagine the excitement of performing in the concert at the end of the semester; they encounter that excitement from the very beginning of each rehearsal. The music is sonically accessible, consisting mostly of contemporary gospel music with R&B-like balladry and pop-friendly melodies layered over danceable funk and hip-hop rhythms. The music is lyrically accessible because of Coleman's choice of songs with simple, clear language and imagery derived from contemporary life. Both the environment and the choice of music work together to make singing with Third Day an experience that is exciting, enjoyable, and easy.

And yet, while participation in Third Day is characterized by having a good time, the experience is far from trifling due to the considerable influence of the presence and personality of David Coleman on the choir's communal culture. Coleman intentionally and explicitly presents gospel music as firmly situated within the black Christian tradition and insists that any authentic experience of singing in a gospel choir requires an understanding of that tradition, an appreciation of that tradition, and to the extent possible, a participation in that tradition. Coleman mediates the black Christian tradition within the choir's communal space through the practices of prayer and preaching.

Coleman positions the Christian practice of prayer as a necessary component of the kind of experiential education that the students should expect when they enroll in a course that entails participating in a gospel choir. However, Coleman is careful to acknowledge the presence of non-Christians in the group in his presentation to the choir.

The following is an example of how Coleman leads the choir in prayer:

We thank you, for those of you who don't pray, for allowing us to do so. We thank those of you who pray for doing so. Before I pray I just want to say about prayer, you don't need to pray to know how important prayer is. Those of you who don't pray know how important it is to people who do. And in that [knowledge] lies peace. If you can appreciate why someone does something even though you don't do it, we have peace. And by the word, "appreciate," I truly mean the real definition of appreciate; not "tolerate," not "don't be bothered by." I mean appreciate like "get it," like "understand." We should live in a country that truly lives by its own creed: freedom *of* religion, not freedom *from* religion. And that means that my personal faith has to exist in this country next to people who share a different one or next to the person who doesn't have one. That concept is beautiful and it gives everyone the opportunity to grow and to change... I really appreciate all of you for the time that we spend together and the allowance of different faiths to exist. But for the respect for this Christian faith and this Christian walk, to be able to stand here and allow us to do that, I thank you. Let us pray:

When Coleman interviewed for the position of ensemble director for Third Day, the first question that members of the Department of Music asked him was about his feelings regarding prayer. They explained to him that the previous director did not pray during rehearsals and that Christian members of the group were complaining that they did not feel comfortable in a gospel choir that did not pray. Conversely, in times past when prayer was a part of Third Day rehearsals, the non-Christian students complained. Coleman informed the committee that if hired he would be praying as a part of his leadership of the choir, but that he would contextualize it for all the members of the choir regardless of their religious affiliation or personal spiritual practice. Coleman reports that since he instituted prayer as a regular part of Third Day rehearsals, including the kind of explanation quoted above, there have been no complaints to the Department of Music regarding the practice in the six years that he has taught the course.

Similarly, Coleman routinely articulates his understanding of the Christian gospel and its implications for the lives of the choir members, which he interprets as a fulfillment of his call to preaching ministry. Coleman's preaching combines his contextualization of the music within the black Christian faith tradition with his own imaginative application of the insights of that tradition to the concerns and life situations of his racially and religiously diverse collegiate audience. The following example of Coleman's preaching is excerpted from his explanation of the theme for the Fall 2011 semester, "The Power of the Third Day":

The Christian message is this: in this relationship between God and man, in this covenant, sin is the thing in the relationship that separates us from God. It's just like a relationship with a friend or loved one. Anything that separates you, imagine that to be sin. Sin separates us from God and it

makes us not like God. In the Bible it also informs us that all of us are born with the power to sin, the ability to sin, which separates us from God. Therefore, because God loves us, He sets up a system of atonement, which is to bring at-one-meant, to make whole again. The good news is that even though you are a sinner or have the ability to sin, the good news is that you can restore that relationship with God. And the way it's done is through the ultimate sacrifice, which was the Messiah that was prophesied in the Old Testament and which Christians believe is fulfilled by the New Testament or the New Covenant – the healing of the relationship.

That is the good news. That is what inspired African-Americans. It's what inspired African-American people to have faith that despite the situation of slavery, of being tortured, and all the other unspeakable horrors that were happening. Let's not forget that the root of gospel music, and really the root of all of American music is African-American music, is all rooted in a horror, in the suffering, and rooted in the survival of that suffering.

Christianity didn't just affect the African slaves in America, but it also affected their slave masters and melted their hearts to the plight, opened their eyes to see the plight of their slaves. There was a great Christian awakening in America during that time that came from England and spread throughout America and allowed slave masters to share the Bible with their slaves, which some people say is the greatest mistake slave masters ever made, to teach slaves to read Bible stories. Why would you teach an oppressed people about an oppressed people that had a God – the ancient Israelites, the Hebrews, the Jews in the Old Testament – had a God that while they were enslaved they called on and He delivered them? And God placed that faith and that hope within black people. And it was that faith keeping them alive, keeping them surviving, to keep going. It took faith in a God that God would deliver them – and the slave masters also realizing that they could help – through civil wars, emancipation, civil rights, and continues to march on. And that's why Christianity is powerful. That's why it's powerful in the black community and that's what drives gospel music. That's why it continues to grow as an artform and continues to grow as a genre... This message is good news, this un-killable spirit that exists in this music affects people whether Christian or not.

The spirit of the music and the good news is not simply what I explained to you from the Bible about Jesus, or the Messiah, coming to give us atonement and connecting us back to God. That's good news. But also, more specific to your situation, when you go through a situation in life that completely throws you off, whether it's your loved one who has a personal tragedy, whether it's a spiritual issue or mental issue, there is something that could happen to you in your life that's going to cause suffering. Suffering is promised in the Bible. Suffering will happen in

some form in your life. I call that, “The First Day.” The First Day is when suffering happens to you, something happens that makes you suffer. If you haven't suffered in your life yet, it will. There will be suffering.

What do you do when there is suffering? There's a lot of things you can do. You can go off the deep end and throw in the towel. You can choose to fight, to try to survive. Or, you can just do nothing and just wait. And I call the waiting or the fight, “Day Two.” Day Two is when there is still suffering, the situation is still happening, but you're forced to make a choice. You're forced to choose. So, Day One is when suffering is happening and Day Two is when nothing is changing and you're just waiting or fighting. What's “Day Three”?

Day Three is salvation; Day Three is resurrection; Day Three is living again, the end of suffering. That's promised, too. And that's the good news. Even though suffering happens, if you wait, you will live again. The Third Day is representative of Jesus' life. There was Jesus' death; the second day after he dies; and then, on the Third Day, resurrection – rise again. Black people, Christians all over the world, and non-Christians alike all experience this movement in life over and over and over again. So the message is no matter what you tend to believe, there is power in waiting, there is power in fighting for the Third Day. It's coming. If you're going through something right now, know that your Third Day is coming. You just have to wait. That's the message.

Although this excerpt represents the most concise representation of Coleman's interpretation of the black Christian faith tradition, it does not reflect Coleman's preferred style of communication which is personal testimony wrapped in comedy. Coleman uses humorous anecdotes drawn from his own life as well as the stories of his friends and acquaintances to great captivating effect. Then, just at the moment of the story's greatest comedic effect, Coleman will communicate the serious point at hand. Specifically, Coleman's use of humor allows the members of Third Day to feel comfortable as they are invited to confront the ordinarily divisive issues of racial and religious difference.

Although Coleman advocates for the universal applicability of the gospel message as it has been appropriated through the experience of black people, he does not seek to strip that message of either its racial or religious particularity. At times, Coleman's

discussion of the persistence of racism and the need to fight for racial justice makes Third Day rehearsals sounds like the "race talks" of the Kuumba Singers. At other times, Coleman's depiction of Christian faith as an individually transformative experience through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ recall the legacy of evangelical spirituality that he built at ISGC. As a result, the discourse within Third Day regarding the significance of gospel music maintains the holistic unity of the racial and religious particularity of the black Christian faith tradition that gave birth to gospel music and that continues to animate its performance. Yet, unlike Kuumba and ISGC, both of which incorporate intentional community-building activities, the black Christian tradition in Third Day is not embodied in any communal practices other than the activity of singing gospel music. Thus, the engagement with the black Christian tradition as a community-forming force is limited to Coleman's performance of prayer and preaching.

Contextual Influences on Communal Identity and Culture

As expressed above, the primary contextual factor in shaping the choir's communal identity and culture is its status as an academic course. However, this reality has four distinct implications for Third Day's communal life. First, because Third Day is an elective course that can be counted towards certain distribution requirements within the undergraduate curriculum, it draws a wide variety of students with varying degrees of commitment. Many students take the course for one semester and never return. Coleman's pedagogical approach assumes the posture of a professor lecturing students on a subject of which they have little prior knowledge.

Second, Third Day's 'introductory class' ethos impact the musical experience. Coleman informed me that his use of a full rhythm section grew out of the necessity to establish and continuously reinforce the choir's sense of rhythm, given that most choir members were novices with respect to singing and performing gospel music. In fact, Coleman began by utilizing the drum sequences on his keyboard to establish rhythm throughout rehearsals and only added a live drum kit because of the need to provide extensive rehearsal time for the choir's drummer, who himself was new to gospel music. Furthermore, these practical realities impact Coleman's song selection, which he intentionally restricts to those with melodies and harmonic structures that are easier to learn. Taken together, these decisions, which are made for very practical reasons, contribute tremendously to the accessibility and excitement that define the Third Day experience.

Third, the transience of the membership not only impact Coleman's pedagogical approach, but also limits the extent to which the choir can function as a meaningful community. Given the wide variety of motivations that lead to enrollment in the course, there is no assumption of communal attachment among choir members. The incredible racial and religious diversity produces a membership in which there are no assumed affinities upon which to ground a sense of belonging and commitment beyond one's own personal experience of enjoyment.

Finally, the status of Third Day as a scheduled class sets definite boundaries that limit the time commitment required to participate in the group, which in turn contributed to the group's rapid growth. The massive size of the group relative to other HBCGCs

increases the feeling of Third Day rehearsals as a social event. Put simply, college students like to be where they believe other college students like to be. Thus, while the relationships within the choir do not develop the depth of the relationships within Kuumba and ISGC, which are nurtured over years of continued commitment, the size of Third Day offers some compensation by engendering a sensation among the choir members that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Communal Voices: Members Making Meaning

Director, David Coleman

College gospel choirs have been central to David Coleman's life and career for over two decades, having directed the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Gospel Choir, Boston University's Inner Strength Gospel Choir, and now Third Day Gospel Choir at Tufts University. Coleman construes the significance of HBCGCs in the context of these predominantly white universities as being rooted in the pioneering work of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers in the 1870s:

It is safe to say that without the existence of college gospel choirs, gospel music would never have been experienced by the world cultures. The Fisk Jubilee Singers set the standard for taking spirituals, creating formalized renditions for them, and singing them. And because people had not heard spirituals before, certainly had not heard them in this way, they became popular and toured the world, became the biggest fundraiser for their school and became world-famous.

If you look at the history of any African-American gospel choir, you'll see that it started off with a few people and it grows into this huge thing. There's obviously something going on here that's bigger than just a style of music. It's the presence and the spirits of the people who lived this music and created this music and continued it on – crying out and demanding a voice in a place where there may not be that voice, demanding to be heard. The people that lost their lives and the people that fought and struggled and called out to Christ, called out to God in song –

their voices are still being heard through people from India, Asian, Africa, America, from all over the place in these choirs, diverse as they are. That's exactly the way it should be.

It's that connectivity that I'm always talking about on that stage – bringing people together of different backgrounds, of different faiths – that wouldn't happen in many other places except a college campus, and certainly not with the diversity that we can experience at a college. That kind of diversity is hard to find even in the city; most cities in America don't have that kind of diversity. So, here we are in New England at the university mecca of the world, with 60 colleges, with people coming from all over the world to come here. This is ground zero for perception and for change and for educating people about this experience.

In his understanding of the significance of historically black collegiate gospel choirs, Coleman identified a twofold mission for these choirs. On the one hand, situated as they are within the context of the modern American university, collegiate gospel choirs are an educational enterprise. They nurture and perpetuate the narrative of the black freedom struggle through the use of an art form that witnesses to the cultural genius of black people. On the other hand, HBCGCs are expressions for black Christian worship tradition that bear witness to the unique relationship between black people and the Christian gospel. Thus, the mission of HBCGCs is not simply to expose their audiences to the culture and history of black people, but to confront them with the spiritual vitality that black people exhibit through their worship of Jesus Christ. For Coleman, HBCGCs are at once an opportunity to educate persons regarding African-American culture as well as an opportunity to involve people in a spiritual encounter with God through the testimonies of black people as they are heard through the gospel music they produced.

Though Coleman views all HBCGCs on predominantly white campuses as flowing from the same cultural and historical stream, he acknowledges that the manner in which each choir mediates the black Christian tradition will depend on the social and

organization context of each group within their respective universities. Coleman explains how his approach to leading Third Day differs from his leadership over ISGC:

Since it was a class for gospel choir and it was my job to introduce gospel choir to them and, really, to introduce African-American Christian worship to them, I started to not talk about my personal religious beliefs, but just talk about religion and faith and talk about life in general, talk about how the human experience in interacting with faith works and how that would apply to everyone in order so that they could understand not only how a person could be Christian, but to understand more why African-Americans gravitated towards the Christian religion...

And so, I do look at what I do as ministry still, but very different than Inner Strength. We do not do altar calls at Tufts. However, I would if I felt the call to. I haven't felt that way about Tufts. But, I have been able to lead people into a different light. I get people who write me correspondences, often atheists who are feeling something that they don't know how to explain, and I'm the person that they have chosen to express these feelings with. To me that is more powerful than someone accepting Christ because for an atheist, educated atheists who pride themselves on intelligence and looking at things empirically, if they are starting to think and feel a different way about their personal walk with God, that's where we clap, that's where we shout, that's where we claim the victory. You don't wait 'til the battle is over; you shout now. That, to me, is the beginning of their walk with Christ. There is no doubt in my mind that people have walked into that class as an atheist and walked out with a completely different perspective about their own life, about God, and about their walk.

The nature of Third Day as an academic course and not a community of faith is what provides Coleman the opportunity to present the gospel to people who otherwise would not hear it or consider it as deeply and as personally as they do in his class. Coleman views his role as ensuring that the black Christian tradition has as much influence as possible on the members as they process the significance of singing gospel music. His work is a delicate balance between advancing the black Christian tradition as a normative force on the experience and fostering the interpretive agency of the students. "I tell everybody every year," Coleman recounts, "gospel choir is African-American in its

history and it is Christian in its history, and those things need to be known and appreciated. However, you don't need to be African-American or Christian to sing gospel music, to participate in a gospel choir, to enjoy it, or to be moved by it. I call it 'The Open Door Speech.'" Instead of advocating that students profess Christian faith or helping those who are already Christians to deepen their discipleship as he did with ISGC, Coleman sees his primary task with Third Day as providing a context in which persons of a different faith or no faith at all can come to an understanding and appreciation of what it meant for the creators of gospel music to be both black and Christian.

"Jasmine"

Jasmine joined Third Day during the spring semester of her freshman year at Tufts. Many of her friends had joined for the fall semester and shared positive reviews of their experience. "I didn't really understand that it was a class," Jasmine recalls, "Everyone was just talking about how much fun it was and how cool David Coleman was." Once Jasmine discovered that Third Day was a half-credit course and that "you're pretty much guaranteed an 'A' in the class," she saw no downside to giving it a try. Jasmine remembers enjoying Third Day right away because it brought together her love for music with the enjoyment of hanging out with her friends. "It was kind of a social thing," Jasmine assessed, "[It was] fun, wrapped up into a class." When I asked Jasmine to define and describe Third Day, her response mirrored what Coleman stated were his intentions for the course:

One of David Coleman's goals, I think, was really to give people – because, Tufts is mostly white and a lot of people in the choir didn't affiliate with any religion in particular – so, I think his goal was really to just show people a lot about the black Christian tradition through the music. He would tell stories; he would kind of preach sometimes during rehearsals, just to expose people to something that they've never been a part of before. And gospel choir is pretty big right now. I think there's over 200 people in the choir. So, he was reaching a pretty wide audience. Everybody loved David Coleman, which was good so they would pay attention. Even though they were with their friends, when he would speak they would pay attention.

Given that Jasmine identifies herself as both black and Christian, I was struck by the fact that she described her understanding of Third Day's identity and mission primarily through the lens of those in the choir who were not black or who were not religious. Although Jasmine enjoyed her experience in Third Day, she did not view herself or those who shared either her racial or religious affiliations as Third Day's primary audience.

Jasmine indicated that while Third Day is intended as an introductory experience, she suspected that it had a profound impact on those who did not come to the choir with a deep knowledge of the black Christian tradition. As Jasmine described the difference between her own experience of Third Day versus that of the non-black and non-Christian members, she identified the enormous significance of Coleman's leadership in the lives of others:

[David's preaching] was mostly just, kind of, funny. It didn't really affect me too much. I feel like other people – you have to understand, people love David Coleman. Like, I mean love him. People really thought he was – and, I mean, I like him, too – but, people really just thought he was “it” and the answer. And sometimes it was frustrating to me because – and, he didn't perpetuate this. He was never like, “I am the truth,” you know, “Listen to me” – but, because people weren't really taking the time to figure out anything outside of gospel choir. It was frustrating to know that they would just take whatever he said and run with it and not really take any time to figure out any other background.

From Jasmine's vantage point, Coleman succeeds in engaging the choir members into more thoughtful consideration of the music they were rehearsing. However, Jasmine found that the choir's disconnection from any formal discipleship structures constituted a dangerous void that discouraged further critical engagement.

As Jasmine further discussed her dissatisfaction with the lack of depth in the choir's discourse regarding the message in the music that they sang, it became clear that her concern was not only for those who had no prior knowledge of the black Christian tradition, but that it reflected her own longing for a communal space where she could further pursue her own theological questions. Jasmine's negotiation of her spiritual development in relation to her participation in Third Day began to emerge as she responded to a question regarding her opinion of Third Day's repertoire:

I have a personal issue with "Jesus" and "God" being used interchangeably. So, whenever that would happen, I would actually feel conflicted about singing it even though I would tell myself, "Whatever. You're just singing a song." But then I would be like, "No! It's gospel choir. It's more than just singing a song. It's supposed to be, sort of, an expression of your faith and your beliefs. And if you don't believe it, you shouldn't really be saying it." So, yeah, I would have issues sometimes. But, I feel like most people didn't take gospel choir too seriously in terms of their religious life...

[Singing in Third Day] just raised a couple of questions, like the whole "Jesus" and "God" thing or, you know, having to believe everything that you say. Or, how gospel music – for example, at home, there's a church that we go to that I grew up in that's predominantly white and sort of quiet. It's not really gospel music; we sing hymns and it's sort of quiet. And there's another church that we go to sometimes where it's mostly West African – my family is from West Africa – and there's a band, the music's louder, more lively. And my mom sometimes wouldn't like it because she always said church shouldn't be a party. You shouldn't be, you know, dancing too much or doing too much of that kind of thing.

So, sometimes in gospel choir when we were having a lot of fun and doing a lot of that, I understood it wasn't a church, but I would feel

like, “Am I supposed to be doing the same kinds of things that I would be doing if my friends and I are at a party, just chillin’ out? Should I be feeling the same kind of way? Is that appropriate? Is that not?” And also with gospel music, a lot of times with the singing, with the soloists, you can do a lot – like, people show off a little bit – and I would always think, “Is that appropriate?” You're supposed to be singing for – like, how much of it is for God and how much of it is for the people who you're singing for? I don't know. So, it just raised a lot of questions for me that I never really got answers to and never really talked to anyone about.

It is interesting to note that Jasmine equated the activities and the aesthetic of Third Day to that of the worship practices in the West African church that she attended occasionally. Jasmine’s observation of the similarities between the two contexts certainly is suggestive of the argument made by gospel music scholars that the art-form owes much to the African ancestry of its creators. However, since Jasmine’s participation in this West African worship context was tempered by her mother’s preference for more outwardly reserved forms of worship, Jasmine’s enjoyment of the aesthetics of gospel music caused some theological dissonance for her.

Because Jasmine was not raised in a traditional black church, then her primary reference point for the bodily expressive nature of gospel music performance was a dance party as opposed to the communal ecstasy encountered in Sunday morning worship. Likewise, Jasmine interpreted the improvisational and sometimes extravagant vocalization of gospel music soloists as “showing off” as opposed to a reflection of the creative freedom in gospel music that testifies to the liberation and joy found in Jesus Christ. And yet, because Jasmine considered her participation in Third Day to be positive, it forced her to rethink her assumptions and consider the possibility that what she was experiencing was a valid form of spiritual expression. Meanwhile, the lyrical

content of Third Day's repertoire instigated Jasmine to engage in theological reflection as she monitored her own reaction to the Christological affirmations contained in the music. Although Jasmine initially intimated that her engagement with Third Day never progressed beyond the superficial enjoyment of singing with her friends, it was clear that her gospel choir experience was having a far more profound impact on the development of her spirituality. It is precisely because her experience in Third Day was playing such a significant role in her spiritual life that Jasmine was so disappointed in the absence of any communal structures for more intentional and dialogical pursuit of these issues.

Ultimately, Jasmine did satisfy her desire for a spiritual community by joining the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College. "I loved it because it was smaller," Jasmine explained, "and I felt like it was more of a community." Although Jasmine emphasized the fact that Kuumba is not a gospel choir, she described its importance as a context for the expression and development of her Christian faith:

There are certain songs that when we do them, a lot of people are more moved by it than just as if we were singing any regular song. And we have a prayer circle at the end where people can lift up praises and prayer requests and people can close with a prayer. It's a lot more – and, it doesn't have to be – but, I feel like people take it a little bit more seriously in terms of a religious space than, say, Third Day. I guess it's sort of been, now that I think about, it's sort of like my pseudo-church family in terms of the prayer circle at the end, singing this religious music with other people who, a lot of people who feel strongly about it and who take it very seriously. I think it's made me think a lot more about what I'm doing and about how I feel about these things. I haven't come to many conclusions, but it's just made me think a lot more.

Jasmine considers Kuumba her "pseudo church family" not only because she is engaging in religious practices such as prayer and singing sacred music, but because she is doing so in the context of a community of shared commitment and shared values. While Jasmine

credits the family atmosphere that she encounter in Kuumba to the authenticity of the members' welcoming attitude toward her, she was also very clear about the importance of Kuumba's predominantly black membership in establishing her sense of belonging. Because a majority of Kuumba's members are black, Jasmine characterizes her connection to the Kuumba community as "automatic."

Perhaps the most interesting dynamic evident in Jasmine's discussion of the relationship between race and communal identity within both choirs is the reflexive relationship between the relative strength of the communal nature of each choir and her experience of the music. Jasmine claims that in Kuumba there is more of an emphasis on the history and meaning of the music than in Third Day, which she characterized as focusing more on the fun atmosphere and offering only an introductory, more superficial treatment of the music. Yet, in my observations, I observed that David Coleman spends a far greater percentage of his teaching time instructing Third Day about the history of the music than is devoted to this purpose in Kuumba. Likewise, Coleman is far more explicit and forceful in imploring students to reevaluate their thinking with respect to the role of race and religion in society and in their own lives. The real difference that Jasmine points to is the level of investment in these issues by the students themselves. Jasmine loves singing the music in Third Day and she testifies that the content affects her greatly. However, Kuumba felt like more of a community to her because she sensed that everyone around her was being affected as deeply as she was. Jasmine experiences music in Kuumba as important to its members because it connects them to the struggle of

black people. Since the majority of Kuumba's members are black, this struggle is not something they are simply learning about or being introduced to. It is *their* struggle.

"Nicholas"

Nicholas still remembers the first time he heard black gospel music. He was 7 years old and his parents had taken him to see the National Center of Afro-American Artists production of Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity*. Nicholas's family was one of many who pour into Boston from its affluent suburbs to attend the show each year. Nicholas was captivated by the sound of the music, enthralled by its combination of the harmonies of classical choral music with the rhythmic blues of the Elvis records that his father played on an endless loop at home. So, when Nicholas first heard the new gospel choir that had been formed at his mostly white high-school, he knew he had to be a part of it. Nicholas auditioned for the ensemble's director, Sheldon Reid, who patterned the group after the Kuumba Singers. The group was unique in its ability to attract students from various groups within the school, pulling together "theater kids with jock kids who have never done music." Additionally, the choir was more racially diverse than any other group in the school because Reid "made a point to recruit black students" to join the group.

Although the ensemble primarily focuses on learning and performing music, Nicholas remembers that it also had a profound effect on his consideration of race and religion. Nicholas appreciated how Reid would take advantage of the choir's racially diverse composition to instigate conversations about race in the U.S. With respect to

religion, Nicholas identifies his engagement with the group's repertoire as the catalyst for his own spiritual development:

I think I've become much more comfortable [with my spirituality] because, like I said, I wasn't raised super Christian. I was raised Orthodox or whatever, but I had a lot of hesitation and reservations, at first, coming into this [music]. You know, what does it mean for me to appreciate this music and to sing this music? Do I believe what I'm saying? Am I hypocritical for saying this stuff and not 100% believing it? But I think early on I was like, "No. I'll interpret these words as I will. When I sing them, they'll come from my own interpretation of it." And I think it's important in these diverse, multi-faith, multiracial groups to be able to do that.

But I still remember early on one of my early conversations with Sheldon was about –. I was like, "I want to write a gospel song, but I don't know if I can. I want to say stuff about God or Jesus, but I don't know what that really means to me." And he was supportive, you know. He was like, "Well, what does that mean? Do you believe in God?" You know, starting those conversations. And as I've gone and had my own spiritual journey, I've become much more comfortable writing about God and Jesus in a way that I can – in a way that means something to me in my own experience.

As this anecdote suggests, Reid became an important mentor for Nicholas both musically and personally. So much so that when Nicholas was applying to college, he committed to staying in the Boston area in order to continue working on music with Reid.

Although Nicholas was committed to joining the Kuumba Singers, as an entering Tufts University student he decided to join Third Day as well. Initially, he could not help comparing Third Day unfavorably to the teaching style of Reid that had been so formative for him throughout high school. Nicholas describes how his understanding and appreciation of Third Day matured from his early presumptions:

I obviously loved the music, but I was hesitant just because of how different from Kuumba it was because, musically, I didn't feel it was as good. I think I came in as a kind of – there was a somewhat elitist type thing going on. I was kind of a gospel choir snob. Like, "Listen to those

glottal attacks! Are you guys kidding me? So sloppy!” But I was interested in it just because of the music, and I love performing. And I knew it wouldn't be the same as Kuumba, but I still wanted to be a part of it.

It took me some time to be able to appreciate the differences between these groups. Given that [Third Day] meets less frequently, that changes the dynamic relative to Kuumba. And, the fact that it has freakin' 1700 people changes the dynamic of the experience! It's very much a, kind of, “just come to have a good time” type of thing. And not in a way that's trivial or, like, “everybody's just hanging out” kind of thing, but, to really take time. I think [for] a lot of people got a very positive – like, their spirits were uplifted by going. Even though it was only two hours a week, they very much look forward to those two hours as a time to just, kind of, let go.

And I think David also brought his energy. It was less about learning the music, in a lot of ways, from Kuumba. It was more, I think, just him talking about himself and his own personal struggles and stuff like that. I think that changed the dynamic of the group in a way that I think brought a lot of people in emotionally because that spiritually opened them up. He contextualized the music a little bit more.

Nicholas's appreciation of Third Day grew as he became more cognizant of the way certain contextual factors shaped the nature of the choir's activities and communal culture. While the choir's size, transient membership, and the time constraints of the rehearsal all impeded the quality of the final musical product, Nicholas learned that the real significance of Third Day was the rehearsal experience itself. Nicholas began to see the atmosphere of excitement not as a triviality, but as a genuinely consequential encounter that lifted the spirits of the participants.

As Nicholas came to understand the potential of Third Day to significantly impact the lives of its members, he also recognized that helping the group realize this potential was a significant leadership challenge for Coleman. Like Jasmine, Nicholas believes that the racial composition of the two groups contributes to the difference in the level of commitment. Because so many members of Kuumba are personally invested in the choir

as a black community, then every activity of the choir is endowed with a certain degree of importance. With Third Day, the choir members do not necessarily enter the experience with an expectation that the activities will be significant in their lives. Accordingly, the repertoire of Third Day—which Nicholas dubs a “taste of gospel music”—must be appealing enough to grab the attention of these students and substantive enough to provoke them to deeper consideration of the cultural history and faith tradition that produced it. Nicholas’s describes the Third Day experience as one that appeals to students’ desire for fun and excitement, but then invites them to open themselves up to the possibility of a more meaningful encounter with one another, with history, and with God.

Nicholas is clear-eyed about the limits of the collegiate gospel choir experience to impact real change in the lives of its members. Nicholas laments that Third Day does not take full advantage of the diverse population it attracts by facilitating meaningful interactions among choir members. Nicholas observed that even after a semester of singing in Third Day “there are a lot of white people who have still never really talked to a black person.” And even though Kuumba is far more intentional about cultivating these kinds of conversations about race, Nicholas felt that Kuumba was no better than Third Day in getting students to discuss religion with one another. “That’s been one of the things that I’m sad about,” Nicholas opined, “For both of them, I feel like faith is not brought up as much.” However, while Nicholas conceded these limitations, he still concluded that both choirs provided their members a uniquely impactful experience:

I think for the University and the community and the national context in which we are, to have a diverse group of people coming together in this

very unified way is extremely significant. I think it's very rare. And I see them very much as places where those things are crossed and transcended, in the best sense of the word; where true bonds are made; where white people know what it means to be an ally now. So, they're able to talk very intelligently, talk about racial stuff and have a vocabulary with which to discuss it. And I think that's very rare. But only these types of spaces, where it can open people up in that way, both for white people to be receptive and for black people to feel open to share their experiences. To create those contexts where that can happen is very rare.

And, obviously, the faith piece of it as well – you get Jewish people standing next to atheists and they're singing about God. And it's like, what? What the hell? What do we believe here, people? Does it even matter? And I think that's the most important – 'cause I've also had a very eclectic religious background anyway. But it's so powerful to me to have these people, this wide group of people. And so it's like, whoa! What do we really mean by “God”? What do we mean by “Jesus”? As far as our own experiences go, what does it really matter now? If we're able to connect with each other on this deep level, and if struggle is really the thing that keeps bringing us together and that we keep singing about, which is so much of what this music is about, then what does it matter if I'm a Buddhist and you're a Hindu? We already have this connection. Our vocabularies are different, our cultures are different, but we've connected. So, I think that's what makes them so significant.

I think for me, I noticed those things that I was uncomfortable about and was like, I gotta find out more about these things, both about my own faith – what I believe in – and about race stuff. What does it mean for me as a white person to be singing this music? What are the ethics behind that? And I tried to have those conversations. So, it wasn't just an internal thing with me. I've been able to do that with other people, other members of the group.

For Nicholas, the significance of Third Day and Kuumba lies in the intersection of the social context and the spiritual content that define both groups. The content of the music shapes the environment of both groups in a way that encourages students to “bring [themselves] to the group.” More specifically, because the music emanates from and testifies to the unique experience of black people with the Christian faith in light of their struggle for freedom, then the process of understanding and appreciating the music requires that students confront the race and religion of the music's creators. This

confrontation is experienced differently by the students depending on their own social location, which subsequently challenges them to consider the way that race and religion play into their own sense of identity. For many in these choirs, this negotiation of one's identity in the context of racial and religious diversity of the group takes the form of an internal dialogue. However, for others like Nicholas, the choirs constituted a context of shared experience that became the basis for communal dialogue across the racial and religious identifications that differentiated them.

For Nicholas, the ultimate importance of Third Day and Kuumba is the role that both groups play in helping students to not only confront the reality and significance of their racial and religious differences, but to transcend those differences. Yet, Nicholas is very careful to clarify that by transcendence he does not mean that differences are minimized, avoided, or ignored. Rather, transcendence is the result of having confronted the reality and the significance of those differences while still maintaining deep connection with one another through that process. Without the honest, though sometimes painful, confrontation with the differences that divide, then the feeling of connection that comes from sharing in the joy of gospel music would be nothing more than the trivial pursuit of superficial excitement that Nicholas identified as the danger of Third Day. On the other hand, dialogue about differences, however insightful or poignant, that is not also accompanied by the strong bonds of a caring community are merely academic, lacking the ability to sufficiently open students up emotionally to the point where real transformative exchanges can occur. Transcendence requires both the challenging confrontation with differences and the context of a shared experience that is

meaningful enough to have a real impact on the identity and ethical deliberation of the participants. For Nicholas, both of these conditions are met in college gospel choirs and are facilitated most powerfully by the music itself. In both Third Day and Kuumba, the directors insist that students learn to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of the black Christian tradition. Yet, both are equally insistent that one need not share that heritage in order to participate in the power of the music or be moved by its message.

Summary

Despite their unique mission statements and organizational structures, the three choirs described in this chapter share fundamental similarities that justify their consideration as representative of a cohesive cultural phenomenon, which I have termed “historically black collegiate gospel choirs” (HBCGCs). At a most basic level, HBCGCs can be identified as collegiate choral groups whose repertoire consists primarily of the variety of sacred music genres and styles that were created by black Americans for use in Christian worship. HBCGCs are also dedicated to appropriating this music with integrity by maintaining a strong connection between the music and the black Christian faith tradition that imbues it with meaning. HBCGCs pursue this goal in ways that reflect both their own academic context and the black church context they are attempting to invoke. As an academic enterprise, HBCGCs educate their members and their audiences about the experiences of suffering, struggle, survival, and salvation that animate the sacred songs of black Christian folk. However, HBCGCs do not merely educate; they participate in the black Christian tradition by adopting and adapting elements of black

Christian worship in the development of their communal identity and communal culture within the university context.

The ability of HBCGCs to embody the black Christian faith tradition in their communal life is complicated by their inclusion of students for whom that tradition is not normative. On the one hand, the practice of welcoming and incorporating non-black and/or non-Christian members bears witness to the roots of HBCGCs in the black protest movement against racial discrimination and the Christian love and hospitality of the black church. On the other hand, the experience of all three HBCGCs demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining their communal identity as black Christian communities without a sufficient number of black Christian members. Yet, the research also paints a portrait of three vibrant HBCGCs whose members consider their participation in the choirs to be among the most important experiences in their college life. Their testimonies of being challenged and transformed by their encounter with black sacred music and the communities that have formed around its performance suggest that these HBCGCs have successfully adapted this black Christian worship practice to their unique settings and situations. In the next chapter, I reflect on how these adaptations contribute to the development of black ecclesiology in postmodern culture.

CHAPTER FIVE
TOWARDS A POSTMODERN BLACK
ECCLESIOLOGY

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings of my research with historically black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) at three major research universities in the greater Boston area. The findings consisted of the practices that comprise the communal life of each choir and profiles of how the directors and a sampling of student members made sense of their participation in these groups. I attempted to faithfully represent the activities and attitudes of my research subjects. However, my description of their communal culture and the contextual factors that had significant bearing on the shaping of that culture was informed by my own assumptions about the impact of the black Christian tradition. I was particularly influenced by the ways that the HBCGCs adopted and adapted the form, content, and social context associated with black Christian worship. In this chapter, I will utilize my research findings to answer the first of my two research questions, which is: In what ways and to what extent do HBCGCs on predominantly white university campuses function as communities of black Christian faith development and public expression?

The argument will unfold in four movements. First, while my theological assumptions about the impact of the black Christian tradition on the communal life of HBCGCs were operative in the descriptive theology of the previous chapter, I will now offer a more explicit theological analysis of the HBCGCs and the meaning-making of

their members. Second, I will discuss how several black scholars understand the postmodern cultural context from a black cultural perspective and the challenge that context poses for the construction of black theology. Third, I will assess the proposals of black practical/pastoral theologians as they attempt to reconstruct the theological basis for a uniquely “black” Christian communal identity in the postmodern U.S. context. Finally, I will offer a constructive postmodern ecclesiology for black churches that I use to assess the various ways and the extent to which HBCGCs function as black ecclesial communities.

Collegiate Gospel Choirs in Theological Perspective

Although Melva Wilson Costen’s theology of sacred music in the black Christian worship tradition (chapter three) addresses the journey of gospel music from the black church to the commercial music industry and the concert stage, her reflections on the ability of gospel music to carry the creative power of black Christian spirituality to those who do not share its racial or religious heritage resonate with the dynamics apparent in the role that historically black collegiate gospel choirs play on their predominantly white campuses. Costen argues that if a practice is insufficiently nourished by its community of origin, it will lose its connection to its generative tradition. However, Costen’s insights suggest that the converse may also be true – that a practice can embody its generative tradition to such a significant degree that engagement in the practice can transform a new setting into a community that reflects the generative tradition.

In observing the activities of the Kuumba Singers, Inner Strength, and Third Day, as well as listening to the way their members interpret their experience, one can

recognize the imprint of black Christian spirituality as it is mediated through the practice of singing songs from the African-American Christian worship tradition as Costen defines it. Their singing of black Christian music constitutes an act of worship—that is, an act of invoking, experiencing, and celebrating the presence of God. During rehearsals and concerts, these choirs appropriate distinctive tropes of black worship style as they inhabit the spirit and aesthetics of the music. This holistically expressive style of worship is not native to all of the students (not even all the black students). However, by mimicking the actions traditionally associated with gospel music performance, students are initiated into a way of acknowledging and interacting with the presence of God that is the unique gift of gospel music’s African heritage. The aesthetic distinctiveness of black sacred music performance is not a small matter in the communal culture of these choirs, since it is the primary characteristic that makes participation in these choirs something wholly different from any other activity in the students’ college experience. The aesthetics associated with the music, both vocally and bodily, serve to instigate choir members’ interpretation of their experience as one of transcendence—of opening up spiritually—thereby, transforming the rehearsal room or concert stage into sacred space.

As powerful a conveyor of spirituality as black Christian music may be, the choirs’ participation in the practice of singing black sacred music is connected even more explicitly to African-American Christian spirituality through their members’ and leaders’ efforts to create and sustain intentionally relational communities in and through the choir experience. First, the expression of hospitality is evident in the practice of inclusive welcome that so many members identify as having been critical to their decision to join

their respective choirs and their ongoing commitment to stay. This initial welcome ushers new members into a communal culture that prioritizes fellowship. The warm greetings and conversations that fill the atmosphere before and after rehearsals can appear to be the same as any other social gathering of college students. However, these conversations are understood as expressions of spiritual community because they are prelude and postlude for the activity of singing praises to God. This intentional fellowship finds even clearer expression in Kuumba and Inner Strength, both of which expand these conversational moments into communal structures for meaningful shared experiences outside the rehearsal time. This commitment to constructing and sustaining intentional faith community finds its highest expression in the practice of communal care through the activity of corporate testimony and prayer. Even in Tufts' Third Day Gospel Choir, which does not have formal structures for communal care, the practice of prayer is a powerful symbol of the importance of intentional spiritual community as the proper context for the practice of singing black sacred music.

In all three choirs, the students are continuously presented with a normative vision of the meaning of the music in light of the black Christian faith tradition to which the music bears witness. While Third Day is the weakest of the three choirs with respect to the intentional development of authentic community, it is the strongest in its inclusion of proclamation as an element of worship within the rehearsal space. Not only does David Coleman publicly address Third Day more frequently than the other two directors, but he also understands his addresses to the choir as a conscious fulfillment of his call to the preaching ministry. Meanwhile, although Sheldon Reid and Herb Jones do not similarly

describe themselves as preachers, they too engage in the act of proclamation by articulating their normative interpretations of the black Christian narrative in light of the contemporary situation that their students face. One respondent from the Kuumba Singers described his experience of this practice as “the Bible according to Sheldon,” which suggests that members of the choir understand his addresses as a form of preaching even if he does not explicitly define them as such. In Inner Strength, Herb’s occasional and spontaneous exhortations are also viewed by the members as a form of black preaching. Additionally, in both Kuumba and Inner Strength, the directors do not bear the sole burden of perpetuating the black Christian tradition through speech. Their rhetoric is reinforced and amplified by others within the communal structures that have been established for the purpose of teaching the choir members the history and meaning of the songs and inviting them to live into that history, thereby extending the meaning of the songs into their present lived realities.

When taken together, the practices of preaching, teaching, testimony, and prayer create a context of meaning within which the singing of African-American sacred music is interpreted as an act of worship unto God. Even those members who reserve and exercise the right to interpret their own participation as something other than worship of God are mindful that they are deviating from the communal norm by doing so. These HBCGCs have firmly established in the minds of their members that their musical activity is more than performance; the students accept that they are engaged in a faith practice of the black church. In this way, the choirs combat the danger of which Costen warns by challenging the students to understand, appreciate, and [ideally] appropriate the

music they sing—to participate in the good news of the gospel as it has been experienced and interpreted through the struggles, the survival, and the joy of liberation of black people.

It is important to note that the black Christian worship tradition is not the only source of practices and normative interpretation that shape the communal life of these choirs. Clearly, the activities and the attitudes of the participants are also shaped by the context of the contemporary American research university and the way that classrooms and student organizations function as sub-cultural units within college life. However, the choir members testify that their experiences in these choirs are radically different than other experiences and extra-curricular activities that comprise campus life. These groups are more than student organizations; they are family. These students do not simply socialize; they commune. These choirs do not merely sing; they worship. I have used Melva Wilson Costen's theology of sacred music in the black Christian worship tradition as an interpretive lens through which to view the effect of this tradition on the practices of these collegiate choirs and the world of meaning that shapes choir members' understanding of their experience. When viewed through that frame, these choirs emerge as expressions of black Christian spirituality and intentional faith community.

The main significance of this theological analysis for this study is that these choirs maintain their family resemblance to the black church – albeit in different ways and to varying degrees – while negotiating the increasing racial and religious diversity within their memberships. As we have seen, the presence of persons within the choir for whom these features of black racial identity are not native diminishes the ability of the

choir as a whole to be viewed as a symbol of cultural identity. In the case of all three choirs, there is evidence that their racial diversity causes their identity as *black* communities to be called into question by some black students. This dynamic is further complicated by the experience of many black students who do not feel that they conform to these “symbols of ethnicity,” and find that their own black identity is subject to questioning as well. For some of these black students, the choirs represent a home wherein they can negotiate their own contested sense of racial identity in a social context that embraces a wider range of attributes and characteristics as cultural symbols of blackness than the other “black” student organizations available to them. In the Kuumba Singers, explicit dialogue about the nature of race and racial difference occupies a central place in their communal practice. In Third Day, racial identity and racial justice are constant themes in David Coleman’s presentations. For students in Inner Strength, the choir’s racial diversity and the impact it has on the weakening of the identity and culture of the choir is not a subject of open dialogue, but its implications are debated internally by individual members and are sometimes raised in quiet corners among friends. Despite the differences between the choirs, the relationship between the increasingly diverse racial demographics of the group and the group’s communal identity is a complex one that requires careful and consistent attention as the choirs attempt to maintain their integrity as faithful custodians of music emanating from the *black* Christian tradition.

Likewise, the nature of these choirs as expressions of Christian spirituality is somewhat challenged by the actual religious diversity of the membership, but more so by the cultural value of religious pluralism. The evidence from the respondents with whom I

spoke is varied with respect to the impact of that the choirs' religious diversity on individual members' personal spiritual development. However, what is clear is that the students are confronted with the Christian gospel as it finds expression through black sacred song and that this confrontation leads to deeper engagement with their own spirituality without requiring that this engagement result in conformity to any one particular confessional stance. While the outcome of this engagement for individual members is difficult to discern, it is clear that the nature of the choirs as "spiritual" communities is central to the members' appreciation of their experience. In the absence of any explicit confessional regulation or statements of faith, the dominant factor in shaping the spiritual identities of these choirs is the shared communal experience of singing songs that testify to black people's encounter with the Christian gospel. Thus, while religious diversity increases and the value of religious pluralism flourishes within all three groups, the shared communal experience is grounded in a commitment to preserving, understanding, and participating in the sacred music of the black *Christian* tradition. Regardless of their individual response to that tradition, the members find the encounter to be a valuable experience that enriches their lives.

These choirs have forged their identities as groups dedicated to music from the black Christian tradition while negotiating the challenge that diverse memberships pose to the very notions of "black" and "Christian" communal and personal identity. The activity of singing black Christian sacred music maintains its integrity as the sharing of "good news" through "soulful song" because of the intentionality with which these communities strive to participate in other practices that join with sacred music in

constituting the communal context and experience of black Christian worship. The music is tethered to its generative tradition through acts of proclamation, biblical reflection and teaching, testimony, prayer, fellowship, and communal care.

These findings go part of the way toward answering the first research question of this study, which asks, “In what ways and to what extent do historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white university campuses in the Boston area function as communities of black Christian faith development and public expression?” Implicit in the question is my acknowledgement that these organizations do not define themselves as black churches. Thus, what I am tracking is the degree to which they *function* in ways that fulfill the nature and mission of the black church. In summarizing the findings of my research, I have been careful to conclude that these choirs maintain a “family resemblance” to the black Christian tradition that gave them birth. Yet, distinguishing between the choirs and black churches is not as simple a matter as it may seem. From a social-structural perspective, these choirs are extra-curricular student organizations, not churches. However, to answer the question from a theological perspective requires a constructive understanding of the nature and mission of black churches. Thus, I will now turn to a discussion of black ecclesiology with the intent of articulating a theological vision of the black church which I can then employ to assess the communal identity and practices of these historically black collegiate gospel choirs.

As a practical theologian, my discussion of ecclesiology will be shaped by the praxis of the choirs that gives rise to the inquiry. The increasing religious and racial diversity of the membership poses a challenge to the communal identity of these

historically black and Christian groups. Their experience mirrors the debate that is currently occurring within theological discourse regarding the appropriate response of black churches to an American cultural context in which the conceptions of racial identity and faith identity are being challenged from the perspective of postmodern cultural critical theory. If black theology is consumed with the question, “What does it mean to be both black and Christian?” and both of those categories of identity are undergoing dramatic reassessment, then the theologies built upon old formulations of those categories must be reassessed as well. Thus, my ecclesiological discussion will involve a reflexive quality whereby the research on HBCGCs contributes fresh insights regarding the nature of black Christian community within a racially diverse and religiously pluralist postmodern social context even as the praxis of HBCGCs is subjected to critique through the normative gaze of black theology.

Black Postmodern Cultural Criticism Challenges Black Theology

Any understanding of “postmodernity” necessarily depends on how one identifies “modernity.” Theodore Walker, Jr. notes that “constructive postmodern scholars typically mark the birth of modernity by reference to science.”¹ This account of modernity as an historical period typically begins in the 1600s with the Scientific Revolution begun by Galileo and Newton and proceeds to track the social “progress” that this revolution engendered in movements such as the development of mass printing, the

¹ Theodore Walker, Jr., *Motherhood Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 14.

industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism, the transition from feudal monarchy to democratic nation-states, and the declining influence of the Protestant Reformation's successful diminution of the Catholic Church's grip on political, economic, and social processes.² Based on this narrative, postmodernism refers to a cultural worldview that reflects intellectual developments—"Enlightenment" notions of rationalism, foundationalism, essentialism, individual autonomy, and various dualisms—that both fueled and were fueled by these dramatic historical changes in European, and later North American, societies.³ However, "black Atlantic" scholars argue that this narrative reflects a myopic Eurocentrism which fails to acknowledge that the period of so-called Enlightenment progress was "also and mainly about the increasing commodification of the world, starting with the emergence of transatlantic slavery in the fifteenth century."⁴ Reflection on postmodern culture from the perspective of black experience begins with the premise that modernity was, first and foremost, the age of white supremacist oppression of enslaved and colonized Africans in the Diaspora. Accordingly, black postmodern scholars insist that transatlantic slavery and black Atlantic experiences

² Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Walker, Jr., *Mothership Connections*, 15. Walker, Jr., defines "Black Atlantic" as "postservitude black populations and settlements on continents and islands up and down both sides of the Atlantic ocean, and to their various black and colored relations across the whole globe" (vii). Walker, Jr., credits this formulation to Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

should be at the center of postmodern theory's attempts to "understand and transcend modern worldviews and modern world orders."⁵

My understanding of black postmodern thought is heavily influenced by the cultural criticism of Cornel West and bell hooks. West, delineates between the three dimensions of Western postmodern culture: its social-structural determinants, its intellectual theorization, and its manifestation in popular cultural production and popular cultural values. West identifies the following socio-historical bases for the emergence and development of Western postmodern culture:

The unprecedented impact of market forces on everyday life, including the academy and the art world; the displacement of Europe by America in regard to global *cultural* influence (and imitation); and the increase of political polarization in cultural affairs by national, racial, gender, and sexual orientation [identities], especially within the highly bureaucratized world of ideas and opinions.⁶

West's social-structural account of postmodernity is best understood when contrasted with popular/cultural and academic/philosophical renderings of the dawn of the postmodern era. In popular-cultural discourse, postmodernism refers to "a set of styles, forms, and figures" employed in cultural production, which transgresses the reigning authoritative canons.⁷ If the goal of modernity was to assert individual freedom in the face of the pre-modern tyranny of irrational tradition, then "popular" postmodernism aims to wrest individual freedom from the modern tyranny of universalizing rationalism.

⁵ Ibid., vii.

⁶ Cornel West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. 2: Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race and Power in America* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 41.

⁷ West, *Prophetic Reflections*, 38.

Popular-cultural postmodernism, then, is a kind of hypermodernity that seeks to revivify what has become a domesticated and ineffectual modern freedom project.

In contrast, the development of philosophical accounts of postmodernism began in the early 20th century as two world wars proved that the great social structures of modernity—the state and the bureaucratized market economy—were proving ill-equipped to deliver on the promise of modern progress. As nation-states destroyed one another through war, the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor was destroying the dream that capitalism was the culmination of economic innovation. However, in the minds of poststructuralist theorists, the radical Marxist vision of class warfare that arose to combat the excesses of the state and the market relied just as much on homogenizing impulses as the bureaucracies it sought to depose. Instead of replacing one form of hegemony for another, European critical theorists thought it better to deconstruct all “master narratives.” In other words, the postmodern academic deconstruction movement exposed all attempts to unify people into homogenous groupings—whether a “citizenry” devoted to the state or a “proletariat” mobilized against the elite bourgeoisie—as a continuation of modernity’s destructive penchant for suppressing the complexity and diversity of individual identity. Thus, academic postmodern discourse is characterized by the paradoxical attempt to theorize a consensus culture whose defining property is its resistance to theories of a consensus culture. Besides its self-defeating paradoxical nature, West’s sharper critique of American postmodern philosophers is that their Eurocentrism “restricts them to highbrow French academic language and blinds them to

the realities of black (and female, Hispanic, gay, and lesbian) otherness, difference, and transgression, occurring beneath their very noses in America.”⁸

West argues that both postmodern cultural practitioners and philosophical theoreticians resort to symptomatic treatments of postmodern culture that do not take account of modernity’s fundamental roots in political domination and exploitation. Because of the increasing control that the market has assumed over cultural production and the increasing monopoly of the academy over intellectual production, both popular-cultural and academic-philosophical postmodern discourses are generated within a growing professional managerial stratum consisting of what West terms, “a mass middle class, or at least a mass working class with a bourgeois identity that [understands] itself as middle class.”⁹ The commodification of culture and the commercialization of the arts mean that the poor and the mass middle class alike depend on popular and academic discourses of identity to serve as buffers between a small upper class and a mass working class coping with the ravages of a merciless global free-market economy. The prevalence of postmodern-thinking cultural and academic professionals results in the production of intellectual and cultural work that gives voice to more and more of the previously voiceless, thereby mitigating the anxiety and meaninglessness that the excesses of the market engenders among the mass population. In a sense, even though marginalized people are under-represented in popular and academic discourse, they are still *over-*

⁸ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 170.

⁹ Cornel West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. 1: Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 98.

represented relative to their actual agency within the socio-political structure. However, it is not the masses that primarily benefit from this managerial buffer of postmodern cultural and intellectual production. West argues that those who control and benefit from the market allow a slice of marginalized people into “the new marketplace of power, privilege, and pleasure,” as a means of pacifying the postmodern cry for a deconstruction of the hegemonic center-margin paradigm.¹⁰ The entrée of a thin slice of previously marginalized people into the relatively privileged managerial stratum of society gives the illusion of triumph over the homogenizing forces of modernity.

West argues that market forces have adapted to the postmodern cultural and intellectual shift toward identities of particularity by capitalizing on “the proliferation of differentiated consumers, with distinct identities, desires, and pleasures to be sold and satisfied.”¹¹ The tragic irony of the postmodern situation, according to West, is that postmodern discourses of difference that arose in opposition to oppressive homogenizing political structures result in the fracturing of the very unifying group identities that are necessary to stage a serious assault on those oppressive socio-political structures. West does not deny the incredible importance of the entrée that a slice of marginalized folk have been given via cultural and intellectual production. That access is only good, however, if those who have been given voice retain a sense of prophetic vocation to promote the restructuring of society according to a more just order. These cultural and

¹⁰ West, *Prophetic Reflections*, 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

intellectual professionals must connect their privileged discourses with the harsh socioeconomic reality in which the masses still find themselves mired.

While West's vision of prophetic black postmodernism seeks to resist and demolish white supremacist *political* hegemony, bell hooks argues for a "postmodern blackness" that can counter the threat that white supremacist *cultural* hegemony poses to black people's lives. hooks views European postmodern theoreticians' critique of essentialism as a powerful tool against this threat because the practice of affirming "varied black experience...also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy."¹² hooks argues that white supremacy, at its core, is not sustained by political, economic, or even military might, but by narratives of domination and subordination that normalize the division of reality into subjects who exercise "mastery over" objects.¹³ The power of the civil rights and black power movements to achieve black political liberation was greatly diminished, hooks argues, by the capitulation of both movements to the master narrative of patriarchy.¹⁴ In this way, the struggle for political liberation is stunted by the black community's failure to resist white supremacist and patriarchal cultural hegemony.

¹² bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

For hooks, postmodern blackness is the assertion of a radical black subjectivity that refuses objectification and reclaims the authority to define black cultural identity—both individual and communal—in novel ways that do not “imitate the behavior, lifestyles, and most importantly the values and consciousness of white colonizers.”¹⁵ Nostalgic attempts to recover this identity by appealing to black nationalistic unity or essentialized cultural homogeneity fail to account for the reality of postmodern black life, which is marked by a greater degree of differentiation along the lines of geography, class, and culture.¹⁶ Thus, the critical task for black postmodern scholars is “to radically revise notions of identity politics, to explore marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory black liberation struggle.”¹⁷

In *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995), Victor Anderson brings the postmodern cultural criticism of West and hooks to bear on black theology’s construal of the black Christian tradition. Anderson charges that black theology employs an essentialist construction of blackness as the foundation for communal identity and solidarity. Anderson identifies two dangerous implications of this approach. First, “ontological” constructions of blackness are reactionary, requiring whiteness and racial oppression as a starting point and thus privileging whiteness by placing it at the “center” of black identity. Anderson explains this consequence of ontological blackness this way:

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

In black theology, blackness has become a totality of meaning. It cannot point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without also fragmenting...

Existentially, the new black being remains bound by whiteness. Politically, it remains unfulfilled because blackness is ontologically defined as the experience of suffering and survival. Any amelioration of these essential marks of blackness performatively contradicts ontological blackness in black theology. Insofar as it is predicated ontologically on symbolic blackness, black theology remains alienated from black interests in not only surviving against suffering but also thriving, flourishing, and obtaining cultural fulfillment.¹⁸

Black theology does not contribute to individual thriving or flourishing as long as it is limited to a theology of survival or liberation because its narrow conception of black life is too restrictive of black freedom and, therefore, concedes black identity to white supremacist renderings.

Anderson connects this limited political perspective on black life to the similarly restrictive understanding of black cultural experience as a uniform set of cultural representations that are deemed “authentic,” whether language, music, fashion, or other norms of behavior. In contrast, postmodern conceptions of blackness seek to make room for myriad experiences of blackness as a way of affirming the complexity of individual identity formation. Postmodernism seeks to de-center all privileged identities in order to give full voice to the multidimensional individual. Anderson acknowledges the attempts by womanist and second generation black theologians to advance black theology through their retrieval of women’s voices and the neglected slave narratives in an effort to widen the concept of “black experience” beyond essentialist ideology and generalizations of

¹⁸ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 92-93.

cultural performance. However, in the final analysis, Anderson understands their work as “hermeneutics of narrative return” that serve to reinforce the foundation of ontological blackness that was built by the classical formulations of first generation black theologians.¹⁹ Thus, Anderson finds these later developments in black and womanist theologies insufficient bases for the construction of black communal identity in a postmodern context that eschews any notion of community that imposes totalizing norms of thought and practice. Anderson’s insightful criticisms of black theology call into question the efficacy of the ecclesiological formulations of first and second generation black and womanist theologians (discussed in the literature review) to serve as the foundation for understanding the nature and mission of black churches in this new postmodern moment.

Re-Constructing Black Ecclesiology

As West and hooks advocate, a constructive postmodern black theology must move beyond this deconstructive work to a re-constructive moment that takes the critiques seriously while rebuilding the foundations of community that can sustain the best of the black church tradition. Homer Ashby offers a black pastoral theology that attempts to respond to Anderson by formulating a “non-apologetic black cultural genius” approach to constructing black identity.²⁰ Anderson is right, Ashby argues, to reject an apologetic understanding of black cultural genius that is too reactionary and dependent on

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

²⁰ Homer Ashby, Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan: A Black Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 87-89.

whiteness for its construction. This leads to litmus tests within the black community over who is authentically black and who is not. However, Ashby finds the new black postmodern politics of difference to be too individualistic in its conception of freedom. Ashby argues that one of the gifts of the dawn of postmodernism has been the shift away from a concentration on the individual self as an autonomous rational entity toward an understanding of individual persons-in-community that rescues modernity's fight for individual freedom from the excessive, rugged individualism to which modernity gave birth.²¹

Furthermore, in its insistence that black experience not be defined by oppression, Ashby finds that black postmodern politics of difference ignores the reality of racism that still plagues black people.²² While they theorize about a non-essentialist understanding of blackness that is rooted in the breadth of possibilities for individual flourishing and not in suffering or oppression, they fail to acknowledge the reality that for many black people and other oppressed groups, the possibilities are few and suffering *is* the starting point of their existential reality. While Anderson accuses classical and second generation black and womanist theologians of choosing communal solidarity over individual well-being, Ashby contends that Anderson has chosen individual well-being over communal identity. In contrast to these two options, Ashby's pastoral theology begins by reconstructing the basis for black communal unity not on an assumed shared essence that denies

²¹ Ibid., 84-85.

²² Ibid., 81.

individuality, but on a shared experience of racism and a shared history of adaptive—not inherent, or essential—black cultural “genius.”²³ Thus, Ashby argues that black people have a basis for unity not through conformity to arbitrary and restrictive rules of cultural performance, but in a shared memory of shared practices developed in response to the shared reality of racial oppression.

The black church, says Ashby, “has a unique and distinctive role to play in addressing the crisis of black identity through processes of moral and ethical discernment.”²⁴ Relying heavily on the ethical vision of womanist theologians such as Emilie Townes, Marcia Riggs, and Cheryl Sanders, Ashby hopes that if the black church heeds their call to restructure ministry around what is best for *all* black people, as opposed to its own institutional maintenance, then the black church will be able to merge the best of modern ontological blackness (its commitment to shared black identity and liberation) with the best of postmodern cultural politics of difference (its commitment to individual self-expression and fulfillment). Through its worship and ministries of communal care, the black church can once again provide the social-structural context wherein black people, in all of their diversity, find a mutual home. Using the biblical account of the formation of Israel from a diverse set of tribes into a unified people as the primary metaphor for his vision of the black church, Ashby proclaims that “the Joshua church is a place of safety and affirmation where persons are assisted in forming their

²³ Ibid., 91.

²⁴ Ibid., 95.

unique identity and contributing to the church's mission in God to bring all to full humanity."²⁵ By framing his ecclesiology around the "Joshua generation," he is able to draw parallels to this post-Civil Rights/post-black power era in which blacks look back at the awesome deeds of deliverance experienced by their ancestors at the hands of a mighty God. The narrative of God's liberation of the Moses generation will be the basis of their communal identity. However, by basing his ecclesiology on the Joshua generation, which made its home among the existing inhabitants of Canaan, Ashby conjures an image of the black church as a Joshua Church that must maintain its narrative-formed communal identity in the midst of a diverse social environment that requires innovation in the form of their communal life.

The strength of Ashby's pastoral ecclesiology is that it addresses Anderson's central critique that black theology is built on essentialized notions of black identity that exclude difference. By linking black communal identity to black communal ethics, Ashby makes openness to and inclusion of difference a definitional marker of black communal identity. In Ashby's vision, the black church as Joshua Church distinguishes itself from the peoples by whom they are surrounded and with whom they must live by the way black Christians behave toward one another and to the stranger. Ashby borrows the following normative questions for black church ethics from Emilie Townes:

Can we be a people of faith in the midst of diversity? That is, can the black church enter into partnership with a variety of persons with different backgrounds and gifts so as to mobilize the most effective force against oppression? What are we teaching the people? That is, are we teaching them how to be family and community in those ways that have sustained

²⁵ Ibid., 95-96.

and protected a people in the past? What are we doing for the spiritual health of the people? That is, are we worshipping and living together in such a way as to portray life-giving images of blackness, maleness, femaleness, age, income, and sexuality as well as countering any voice that tells black people they are less than? What are we saying to the people? That is, are we reinforcing among ourselves that we are worthy of love and respect that must be continually claimed as well as fought for in order to retain?²⁶

By bringing womanist ethics into dialogue with black postmodern politics of difference, Ashby retains a black communal racial solidarity while also demanding that the black church's internal politics reflect a commitment to equality and respect of *all* persons, particularly those who have been marginalized under the prevailing patriarchal norm.

Although Ashby's pastoral theology goes a long way toward a vision for a postmodern black ecclesiology, it instrumentalizes the church in service of the goal of black communal advancement without construing that goal as internal to the black church's Christ-centered faith commitment. Ashby registers a note of embarrassment when he muses that "an emphasis on the black church must surely come across as alienating and offensive to African Americans whose faith is not Christian."²⁷ Ashby ends up succumbing to a classic modern Enlightenment dualism between the particularity of 'subjective' Christian faith and the larger, more public goal of 'objective' black socioeconomic advancement and personal fulfillment. In Ashby's pastoral theology, the former is acceptable only insofar as it provides resources—spiritual and material—for the achievement of the latter, more 'fundamental' priority.

²⁶ Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 140-144 quoted in Ashby, *Our Home is Over Jordan*, 95.

²⁷ Ashby, *Our Home is Over Jordan*, 80.

A black postmodern ecclesiology must repair the foundations of black communal solidarity without resorting to a private-public dualism that ghettoizes religious faith. In postmodern culture, tradition returns as the starting point for communal identity and ethical deliberation. A key difference, however, between pre-modern and postmodern views of tradition is the replacement of the former's provincialism with the latter's pluralism.²⁸ The absolute authority that tradition wielded during the pre-modern period with its fairly immobile, circumscribed communities is weakened in postmodern times by the increasing awareness and interaction between people of different communities due to the changes in the means of production (e.g. the expansion and deepening of global free market trade) and innovations in the technologies of travel, communication, and media. With the dawn of postmodernism, tradition makes its way back to a place of central importance, yet not as an authoritative canon that cannot be amended. Rather, the concept of "tradition" stands for the acknowledgement of one's own location within a community with its own unique history, epistemology, and ethics.

In *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (2002), Dale Andrews argues that the black church has been playing this tradition-bearing role for black people since soon after the arrival of African slaves on North American shores.²⁹ Black churches carry forth in

²⁸ Here I am drawing heavily from Lesslie Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), especially his chapters on "Authority, Autonomy, and Tradition" and "Reason, Revelation, and Experience." Although Newbigin never uses the term "postmodernism," many of the postmodern theologians and church leaders view Newbigin's insights on late-modern pluralist Europe as central to postmodern Christian thinking.

²⁹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 12-16.

institutional form the tradition born in slave religion as Africans adapted the Christianity of their masters to their own worldview, thereby forging a new and distinctive Christian tradition that served as a cultural and intellectual “buffer” between the masters and the slaves in much the same way that Cornel West formulates the managerial stratum of popular culture and academia. Andrews refers to this understanding of the role of African-American churches as the “refuge conceptualization” of black ecclesiology.³⁰ The slave-holding class intended Christianity to serve a pacifying function. However, by preserving a counter-hegemonic, subversive consciousness that could resist the oppressive “master-narrative” being fed to them, black slaves developed a kind of proto-postmodern discourse through which they were able to re-narrate the Christian story in a way that affirmed their equal humanity before God and empowered them with the hope that God desired and was working toward their freedom. They were able to use the little access to the means of cultural and intellectual production afforded them—Christian worship—to foster a radical subjectivity that sustained relentless perseverance, radical reform movements, and even revolutionary rebellions.

When slave masters realized the power of black Christian worship and attempted to restrict it, the secret worship gatherings that took place in “hush arbors” were themselves acts of rebellion.³¹ Black Christian worship was central to the slaves’ ability

³⁰ Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 34.

³¹ This is the central thesis of Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), stated most clearly in the chapter on “Religion, Rebellion, and Docility,” 318.

to cultivate a distinct, counter-cultural communal consciousness. Henry Mitchell argues that black people's experience revealed to them that the truth of the gospel, while not completely relative, is uniquely perceived and appropriated by oppressed people.³² Andrews notes that the Bible took a place of central importance within black worship and preaching, as its narrative character made it compatible with the oral culture and tradition of African slaves.³³ From its beginnings, black preaching distinguished itself from the preaching in modern white churches in that its goal was not to pronounce orthodox doctrine, but to articulate what it meant to be an oppressed black community (identity) and how that identity shaped the way black people should live (ethical commitment). According to Andrews, black preaching was assigned the hermeneutical task of interpreting the biblical narrative in terms of the black experience of oppression as a way of informing and shaping a black praxis of survival and liberation through communal pastoral care.³⁴ As we have already seen through Melva Costen's theology of African-American worship, black sacred music joined with black preaching in the hermeneutical and formative work of black Christian worship. The black church, as a collective institutional presence, passed down this tradition of independent and distinctively black faith identity and community formation.

³² Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), especially the chapters on "The Black Approach to the Bible" and "The Black Context for Preaching."

³³ Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

Historically, black churches understand this “refuge” legacy as encompassing both pastoral care and the active struggle for social justice. Classical black theology, on the other hand, dismissed the refuge model of black churches as escapism that neglects liberation ethics. In an attempt to bridge the divide, Dale Andrews proposes faith identity as a dominant paradigm for black ecclesiology that embraces both black theology’s liberation ethics and the nurturing praxis of black churches.³⁵ Andrews identifies four biblical tenets that are especially crucial to the development of counter-hegemonic black faith identity: 1) creation and *imago Dei*; 2) the Exodus; 3) the suffering of Jesus and conversion; and 4) eschatology and the Kingdom of God.³⁶ The African notion of the worth of all of life is affirmed in the doctrine of creation in the image of God. The experience of deliverance from slavery is embodied in the Exodus narrative. The power to survive through daily suffering was proclaimed through the suffering of Jesus and the power of freedom was experienced in the event of conversion to Christ. The promise of wholeness and freedom at the consummation of history provided assurance of God’s activity on behalf of black wholeness and freedom *in* history.³⁷

Andrews holds that the faith identity paradigm in ecclesiology provides black theology a new avenue for addressing its critique to black churches. Andrews does not deny the need for black theology’s prophetic challenge for greater emphasis in black churches of the need to participate in efforts for social reform. However, Andrews argues

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Ibid. 40.

³⁷ Ibid., 40-49.

that classical black theology's indictment of the "refuge" model of ecclesiology represents a misdiagnosis of the problem with black churches. Andrews turns black theology's attention to its "missed-diagnosis" of the impact of American individualism on both the religious and secular life of black communities.³⁸ In this diagnosis, Andrews and Ashby agree. Whereas the faith identity formation of black personhood within the refuge model once served to strengthen the communal consciousness of black peoplehood, American individualism has disrupted black corporate identity and corporate responsibility, replacing it with the struggle for individual socioeconomic advancement.³⁹ The diffusion of racism and the fragmentation of the black community after the successes of the Civil Rights movement led to the displacement of the black church from the center of black life. Rejected by the black middle-class and urban black youth, whose experiences no longer coalesced with the individualistic turn the refuge model had taken, black churches lost their ability to help form black communal identity.

Similarly, Andrews questions the ability of black theology to speak to the black community's fragmented identities. By espousing a liberation ethics that is disconnected from black religious folk life, black theology does not succeed in correcting the fundamental individualism that impedes social action within black church praxis. While black churches have betrayed the faith identity paradigm by neglecting the cultivation of communal identity and responsibility, black theology breaks the faith identity paradigm

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

by divorcing its liberation ethics from the practices and biblical narrative tradition of black communities of faith and struggle.⁴⁰

In order to hold the pastoral practices of African-American folk religion and the prophetic ministry of black theology in dialectical tension within a faith identity paradigm, Andrews proposes that black ecclesiology be shaped around the biblical covenant traditions. The covenant model affirms the refuge function of forming the identity of the black community as a people of God in the face of racist denials of black humanity and dignity. The biblical covenant traditions also uphold the liberation ethic in that the intentional community that the covenant formed was marked by a commitment to social justice. Yet, Andrews notes that the radical prophetic call for social justice took shape in social reform, as opposed to the revolutionary character of the protest politics advocated for by much of classical black theology.

For Andrews, the covenant model points to a prophetic practical theology that seeks reform both from within the religious community and for ministerial praxis beyond the faith community.⁴¹ In the biblical covenantal traditions, prophetic ministry was rooted in the relationship between God and God's people. Thus, the prophetic word of judgment did not stand in contradistinction to worship of God; it presumed it. The socio-ethical demands of liberation were endemic to covenant community's relationship with God. Thus, the biblical covenantal traditions do not condemn the contemporary personal

⁴⁰ Ibid., 87-89.

⁴¹ Ibid., 91.

spirituality of black churches, only the absence of communal liberation ethics from that spirituality.⁴²

This biblical witness to the function of the prophetic office from within the tradition leads Andrews to propose “hearer-response criticism” in which oral culture and folk traditions participate in the forming of meaning in the community. New experiences are allowed to shape the culture, and the subsequent meaning that the culture can make of new religious experiences and old texts. Black ecclesiology operates in this prophetic tradition when it helps the hearers make new sense of unchanging texts in response to changing life situations.⁴³ Thus, the meaning-making of black churches can be subject to correction from within. In turn, the understanding of African-American folk religious communities as a covenant community forces black theology to maintain the interdependence between liberation, repentance, reform, and reconciliation.⁴⁴

In summary, the social-structural determinants of postmodernity as outlined by West—the oppressive impact of global capitalism on everyday life, the expansion of American imperialism, and the increasing polarization of political and cultural life—create a need for alternative structures of corporate identity formation that can withstand the power of the market and the state by reconstituting communal life in ways that do not replicate the oppressive ways of the state and the market. West’s vision for this kind of prophetic public thought and practice was grounded in his study of the biblical prophetic

⁴² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

tradition. Andrews' diagnosis of the black church's failure to remain faithful to that tradition identified the problem as the black church's capitulation to the very forces of American individualism and communal fragmentation against which West cautions. While Ashby attempts to combat individualism with an ethical commitment to communal well-being, he does not ground that commitment within the church's Christian faith tradition. Andrews argues that it is precisely this failure on the part of black theology to link the historical black liberation agenda with the black church's preaching of spiritual liberation—and vice versa—that inhibits black theology from performing its critical function within the faith formation of black Christians. Even Ashby's biblical work with the Joshua narrative is restricted to a social-historical typological reading that poaches the story for indications of fostering cultural solidarity in a socially fragmented people. Though Ashby's focus on pastoral care goes well beyond the emphasis on protest politics in the black theology that Andrews critiques, Ashby never takes up Andrews' challenge to affirm the transcendent dimension of black Christian faith.

Ironically, James Cone, whose work is often cited as the prime example of black theology's failure in this regard, offers a clear corrective. In 1986's *Speaking the Truth*, Cone revises his earlier thought to clarify the relationship between the spiritual and political dimensions of black theology. Admitting to black theology's tendency to reduce black religion to a means toward the ends of black political freedom, Cone examines the “spiritual foundation of black worship.”⁴⁵ Cone understands black churches as

⁴⁵ James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 18.

eschatological communities in that the transition from Saturday to Sunday morning constitutes a rupture in time. In the worship experience of Sunday morning the Spirit of Jesus breaks into the life of the congregation, radically transforming its identity from an oppressed and humiliated people to full humanity. In black worship, “liberation is no longer a future event, but a present happening.”⁴⁶ Cone is careful not to create a false dichotomy between this spiritual sanctification and social liberation. Rather, he insists that this sanctification, this making over of the person in the image of God, is what compels black people to fight for the historical actualization of their full humanity.

A postmodern black ecclesiology need not shy away from the church’s Christian identity in order to conceive of the church as a viable partner with others of a different faith in the fight for the recognition of black people’s full humanity. In fact, to do so would be to undermine the authenticity of the partnership. As Cornel West explains:

Traditionally black people have labored under the notion that we must have some homogeneity in order to be strong. They confuse homogeneity with unity. These are not the same thing. A strong unity comes from affirming diversity in relation to similar goals.⁴⁷

By ignoring the transcendent dimension of black Christian faith, Ashby seems to conflate the black church and its mission with the black community and its collective strivings. Ashby intimates that black postmodern theology would be pretentious to emphasize its Christological convictions, when in fact it is his nostalgic attempt to place the black church at the center of black communal life that claims more for the black church than it

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁷ West, *Prophetic Reflections*, 80.

ought. The black church need not dim the light of its Christian identity in order to claim a place as a member (not the center!) of the black community. Furthermore, the kind of self-critique that Ashby desires that the black church undertake will not be successful if the people understand it to be the imposition of norms not internal to the Christian narrative that shapes their identity. If the black communal unity that Ashby desires the black church to be a part of is to be true unity, and not merely homogeneity, then black Christians must view their affirmation of diverse traditions as integral to what it means to be a Christian.

This is the task of the black church in the postmodern context: to re-present and embody the gospel story in ways that aid the congregation in the self-affirming and self-critical work of discerning what kind of a people that story impels us to be in our time and place. Michael Eric Dyson paints a vivid picture of this kind of postmodern black Christian identity formation in his description of black preaching:

For all its problems and limitations, the black pulpit, at its best, is still the freest, most powerful, most radically autonomous place on earth for black people to encourage each other in the job of critical self-reflection and the collective struggle for liberation...

But the stink in the black church is surely foul. There are still a lot of negative beliefs about gender and sexual orientation and even class that need to be addressed. There are big pockets of staunchly conservative sentiment that, I think, have to be opposed. I try not to avoid these subjects as I preach, and sometimes what I say goes over like a brick cloud! Still, I try to seduce the people into seeing things differently, as I make arguments about why the opposition to gay and lesbian folk, for instance, reeks of the same biblical literalism that smashed the hopes of black slaves when white slave masters deployed it. But I try to win the folk over first, by preaching “in the tradition”...

Using the good feeling and theological credit I’ve gained from preaching well [I] assault the beliefs that are problematic, from homophobia, sexism, patriarchy, ageism, racism, and classism to environmental inequities. And sometimes, they’re giving assent against

their wills, shouting amen to ideas that they may not have otherwise supported without being pushed or prodded—or seduced. They might even muse to themselves, “Well, he’s got a point,” or “I disagree, but I’ll at least think about it.”⁴⁸

By grounding his critique of the black church’s oppressive internal politics in its own tradition of resistance against oppression Dyson is able to gain a hearing, and even some impulsive assent, to his calls for reform. These parishioners voice their assent not because they have been duped, but because the sermon appealed to their faith consciousness. This is an example of Andrews’ notion of “hearer-response criticism.”

Henry Mitchell argues that faith resides in the intuitive and emotive sectors of one’s consciousness.⁴⁹ The genius of black worship has been its ability to foster an experiential encounter between the congregation and the gospel story that goes beyond rational engagement to the depths of intuitive and emotive consciousness, where faith identity has been shaped by a distinctively black understanding of scripture in light of shared black experience. Although Dyson’s hearers do not agree cognitively with his commitment to the operation of a liberating, non-oppressive internal politics that disturbs the status quo of the black church, they are moved to reconsider their praxis because his call reverberates with ‘something on the inside.’

The final chapter of the study focuses on the practice of evangelism and will deal more directly with the question of how a postmodern black ecclesiology makes sense of

⁴⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 473.

⁴⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 23-31.

the relationship between the church and the world. For now, it suffices to say that a postmodern black ecclesiology need not join Ashby in his lament that his notion of the Joshua Church was not religiously inclusive enough to encompass the entire black community. These thoughts from Henry Mitchell and Michael Eric Dyson about black preaching illustrate that the black church's commitment to its Christian tradition does not prohibit the church from critically evaluating that tradition in light of new insights regarding the movement of God. However, such critique can only have its intended prophetic impact when it is absorbed by the community as internal self-criticism through creative, transformational ministry.

Homer Ashby's vision of a Joshua church, grounded in the womanist communal ethics of Emilie Townes, offers an effective counter-critique of the postmodern politics of difference by exposing its failure to properly balance the importance of affirming the diversity of experiences among people of African descent with the importance of acknowledging the reality that black people are still bound together by the persistence of structures of inequality rooted in racism. However, Ashby's efforts resembled the apologetic work of the second generation of black theologians whose approach Victor Anderson titled "the hermeneutics of return" in that Ashby attempts to push out the walls of their vision of the black church in order to make room for more pews without making any fundamental changes to the foundation of ontological blackness upon which his ecclesiology rests. Homer Ashby's notion of an adaptive—not essentialist—heroic cultural genius aimed at shared ethical commitments within the black community offers a strong justification for the maintenance of his current conception of the black communal

identity – that of heroic genius. However, his Joshua Church ecclesiology has pushed the walls of the church out just far enough to include black people who may have different histories or who may engage in a variety of cultural performances, but who nonetheless share the same existential situation of race-based suffering such that they remain unified by the common struggle for liberation and quality of life they must face together.

Likewise, although Dale Andrews' proposal features a looser, more flexible, adaptive formulation of black Christian tradition through his inclusion of hearer-response criticism as a constitutive dynamic within black preaching and pastoral care, Andrews employs this rich notion of tradition in the service of the retrieval of black liberation ethics as the proper ends toward which black Christian faith identity formation is aimed. Without fundamentally enlarging the foundations of black communal identity beyond shared oppression and shared struggle for liberation, neither Ashby's Joshua Church nor Andrews' prophetic covenant community will ever be large enough to accommodate the variety of black students who inhabit the historically black collegiate gospel choirs that I studied, whose unique histories and expansive visions of their life possibilities extend far beyond the oppression-liberation paradigm of black identity employed in either model of black ecclesiology.

More than a decade after the scathing critique of black theology in *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, Anderson published *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Experience* (2008), in which Anderson describes his return to the black church and his desire to offer constructive proposals to meet the very challenge he posed. In this more recent text, Anderson develops a theory of race that allows for black

communal solidarity while accounting for the unresolved, ambiguous, non-reducible, heterogeneous, and complex character of the varieties of African American experience – what Anderson refers to as “the grotesqueries of black life.”⁵⁰ Anderson understands race as a “deep symbol” in black experience. Anderson appropriates the concept as it has been developed by Edward Farley in *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (1996). It is worth including an extended passage from Anderson on this point:

For Farley [postmodern life] signifies a social context in which many traditional, societal norms, values, and institutions are in disarray, lacking contemporary consensus on regulative ideals that may function today as deep symbols... They arise from the intersubjective and inter-human depth structures of human communities. They function as deeply rooted categories of social meaning within our increasing, changing and developing stock of knowledge.

Deep symbols are so basic that one almost always *feels* them to be a priori, or at least one is tempted to regard them as such. But they are historical constructs. Farley warns that they are so basic that their taken-for-granted qualities often conceal their more elusive qualities and ambiguities... They are located in a master narrative that reflexively identifies and defines social action in human communities. Deep symbols are historical and as such they “arise within and express the historical determinacy of a community. The community’s particular character, tradition, and situation are the locus of deep symbols. This means that deep symbols are historical, and hence relative, to a particular community, and thus are changeable. They can rise and empower, and they can lose their power and disappear.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30. Taken from Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1996), x, xi, 3-12.

Anderson recognizes that to understand race as a deep symbol is to accept the possibility of its corruption because its power to "creatively constrain and guide human practices" can lead to idolatry and essentialist productions just as easily as it can occasion innovative possibilities of interplay with our world.⁵² "Blackness," Anderson concludes, "is a social sign [that when] placed within a cultural context of social action... refracts individuated modes of behavior, wishes, desires, preferences, actions, and expressions of persons."⁵³

Anderson draws a fine but significant distinction between the notion of race as a deep symbol and black theology's use of race to signify ontological reality or even the reality of a "common" experience of suffering and struggle. In both cases, race signifies more than just a designation of social demographic; race carries associations with distinctive patterns of thought and action. However, black theology's use of race as communal identifier requires prescriptive formulations of what those patterns should be. In the case of race as a deep symbol, the associations arise descriptively in response to conventions of actual human interaction among people for whom the symbol is a sign of their social reality. Thus, race when understood as a deep symbol, serves its function as a moniker of symbolic unity that evokes associations with distinctive patterns of thought and action while retaining the necessary elasticity to embrace new conventions of actual human interactions that arise from the interplay of the individuality and the freedom of the diverse human beings who ascribe to the symbol.

⁵² Ibid., 32.

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

Anderson then turns to the hermeneutical phenomenology of Charles H. Long to add religious interpretation to the symbol of "blackness":

On Long's account, when one asks what "black religion" is, one is not looking for an essence or formal abstraction from the concrete practices and historical reality of religious life. Black religion signifies discrete ritual, cognitive, and moral practices disclosed in the historical life-worlds of people of African descent. Whatever unities prevail among such communities, they may properly be understood as associational or family resemblances without evoking essentialist notions of meaning and value...

As the sign travels towards symbol, race constructs not only a social ontology; it may also express religious intentions within a people's historical self-understanding; however, racial significations need not determine malicious dichotomies, hierarchies, or domination. For instance, the symbol may signify a relational perspective in which African and African-American communities, societies, lives, bodies, and cultures are understood as religiously connected by webs of significance and circles of relations.⁵⁴

Anderson develops this relational concept of race as a deep symbol that signifies "an acquired understanding of and appreciation for a community's ways: it's public, social, cultural, political, economic, and moral practices."⁵⁵ The cultural facility that one develops within the community that the symbol signifies breeds "natural and social affections and forms of sympathy that substantively fund the idea of community (*communitas*) itself."⁵⁶ Finally, Anderson notes that this concept of race as a deep symbol that signifies patterns of behavior that constitute a community is akin to the notion of communal connectedness that lives in the traditional folklores, riddles, and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 44.

proverbs of traditional African culture, which makes it easier to apply in the interpretation of African-American religious experience.⁵⁷ Anderson has reconstructed the symbol of race in such a fashion that accounts for its ability to signify communal unity grounded in relational experiences between those for whom the symbol is true. Yet, this conception of race does not restrict black experience; rather, by allowing for its elasticity in the face of innovation, divergence, ambiguity, and transgression, this concept of race enlarges the foundations of the black communal identity upon which the black church establishes “webs of significance” and “circles of relations.” Together with the insights from Ashby and Andrews, Anderson’s postmodern reconstruction of the symbol of race provides a strong basis for a constructive postmodern black ecclesiology that reinterprets the ecclesiological insights of first and second generation black and womanist theologians for the present postmodern context.

Constructive Postmodern Black Ecclesiology and HBCGCs in Conversation

The church is the covenant community of faith which testifies that Jesus is the Christ. In and through that faith covenant, the church lives in the way of Jesus, bearing incarnational witness to Jesus’ good news of God’s reign of love which is made manifest through the re-creative agency of the Holy Spirit in the world. The mission of the church is corollary to this identity: to bear incarnational witness to Jesus’ good news of God’s reign of love by living in the way of Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit, which

⁵⁷ Ibid.

entails committed participation in the interpenetrating core practices of worship, service, fellowship, public witness, justice, and intentional discipleship. The black church in North America is that covenant community of faith whose testimony that Jesus is the Christ reflects its communal witness to the manifestation of God's loving reign through the re-creative agency of the Holy Spirit in and through the experiences of people of African descent in the Western world.

I follow the example of the classical black theologians in their identification of the black church with the biblical notion of "the chosen people." I agree with J. Deotis Roberts in his rejection of both James Cone's exclusively oppositional understanding of that identity and Albert Cleage's separatist interpretation of the image. With Dale Andrews, I understand the notion of chosenness to find its fundamental expression in the covenant relationship between God and God's people. Covenant can be understood as political language—as the agreement between a king and his vassal. This is certainly Cone's approach in his conception of Jesus as Lord and King and the church as his servant in the political struggle for freedom. However, covenant can also be familial language. The obvious biblical image to draw upon would be the covenantal language of marriage that depicts the church as the bride of Christ. However, J. Deotis Roberts makes a strong case that the covenant which best defines the community of Christian faith is the adoption agreement between God as the divine parent and humanity as God's sons and daughters. In this iteration of the familial covenant, Jesus is the big brother of the church, making room for us in God's house. As members of God's household we live

under God's house rules – the reign of God – whose defining principle and character is love.

In this affirmation of love as the definition of God's household rule, I look not only to Roberts' analysis of the familial language that dominated the Pauline Epistles, but more fundamentally to the Johannine tradition which affirms both in the gospel and in the epistles that God is love. The central promise that seals the covenant agreement – the adoption papers – between God and God's church is found in 1 John 4:7-17 which reads:

Loved Ones, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Loved Ones, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love; whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world you are like Jesus. (NIV)

As Roberts notes, the black church's identity as a chosen people does not require that it closes its heart to the world. In fact, because the black church is the covenant community of God it is required to operate in the love of God by exhibiting an openness to the world. Because the black church operates out of the love of God it not only has the imperative, but it has the capacity to exhibit loving openness to those considered "other" – even to those by whom the black community has been "othered" in hate.

With James Cone, I affirm the necessity to ground the doctrine of the church in the actual life of congregations. The covenant of adoption is predicated upon God's initiative; God chose us. However, all covenants are based on reciprocity. Thus, the covenant requires the response of the church through its profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ and that it will follow in his way under the reign of God's love. This is why I include "testimony" in my statement of the church's identity. The church is what it does. It has been called together as a covenant community – the family of God – to witness to God's reign of love in and to the world. It is a testifying community. Therefore, the church is not constituted merely by God's adoption; the church is constituted at the consummation of the covenant through its profession of faith. This is one of the primary reasons why the HBCGCs observed in this study do not constitute churches from a theological perspective. In order to be a church, the community of faith in question must be a testifying community – that is, they must publicly assume the family name as a matter of their identity. I should also make clear that this "profession" of faith is not limited to verbal acclamation or the explicit assumption of the title "Christian" or "church." Faith is not merely belief, but an acceptance of the Messiahship of Jesus and, as a consequence, the divine parentage of God. This acceptance of one's status as a child of God is manifest through the adoption of the family's way of living. Thus, while the community's profession of faith may be signified by the verbal acclamation of individual persons, the validity of the covenant is not invalidated by the failure of any one individual in the community to be a faithful witness.

Relatedly, this insistence on profession of faith as a constitutive act that consummates the covenant of adoption does not necessitate a “believer's church” approach to baptism since it is the community, not merely individuals, that testifies to the Messiahship of Jesus. This emphasis on communal witness reflects the biblical covenant models as well as traditional African communal structure in which families and tribes were the units of decision-making. This communal emphasis also reflects the postmodern recognition that our communities and the narrative traditions that help define those communities shape us into who we are as individuals to a great extent. Thus, a postmodern black ecclesiology has biblical, historical, and cultural warrant for conceiving of the church’s responsive profession of faith as a fundamentally communal act.

Recalling bell hooks’ admonition against the dangers of the patriarchal tendencies of communal approaches to black identity, I amend this communal orientation with Roberts’ reminder that the black church is a reflection of African communal ontology of persons-in-community. This African communal ontology is one of mutual interdependence where values are understood relationally. If love is the primary characteristic and principal governing value of the church's identity and mission, then the subjugation of the individual by the community would constitute a relational sin and thus a violation of the principle of love. This communal ontology of persons-in-community also has implications for the notion of spiritual development. When the rational, autonomous self is the primary unit of concern within a community then individual piety will be the form of holiness that discipleship aims toward. However, when the whole web

of mutual interdependence that balances the place of individuals within the solidarity of the community is the primary unit of concern, then holiness must be envisioned as thoroughly relational. Since this relational holiness depends upon a proper balance between peoplehood and personhood, then discipleship will focus on the fellowship of the community as a whole as well as the spiritual formation and holistic development of each individual. The spiritual journey of each individual will result in his or her unique testimony as each individual's experience of the world takes its own distinctive shape. As Victor Anderson argues, when the church's solidarity is built on the foundation of a communal identity that stretches and reshapes itself to embrace variation, the distinctiveness of an individual's testimony serves to further deepen and enlarge the community's boundaries of thought and practice as it absorbs the benefit of the individual's novel encounter with God and the world.

The black church as a covenant community is sustained by tradition. However, James Evans and Dale Andrews both show that tradition can be understood as the process by which faithfulness to the church's mission is strengthened as it nourishes its own faith consciousness through the narration and re-narration of the story of God's creative and re-creative acts in the biblical text and in the text of black experience. Delores Williams argues that if the community incorporates previously excluded voices from within its own tradition, that practice will enable the community to recognize the movement of God in the story of other oppressed people and excluded voices as well. As those new stories become internal to the tradition through creative ministry, they help us to re-narrate the gospel in a way that keeps the tradition attuned to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the classical black theologians agreed that the identity of the black church was wrapped up in the concept of the chosen people, which I have interpreted through the image of the church as the adoptive covenant community of faith, those theologians also agreed that the mission of the church is to bear witness to the reign of God by representing God's reign in its congregational life and by seeking to structure society accordingly. My interpretation of this understanding of the mission of the church is living the way of Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Living the way of Jesus entails committed participation in core practices that embody God's reign of love. Again as Roberts points out, the black church is a sinning church just as it is a sinned against church. Thus, its faithful practice of a communal politics and economics that are reflective of God's love is only possible through the forgiving, regenerating, and empowering work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit that remakes the church according to the beauty of God's creative design. This process of being remade – of sanctification – requires the self-involvement of the church through acts of repentance and critical self-reflection. Andrews' reading of the prophetic covenant tradition reminds us that the covenant relationship required careful and persistent tending through internal prophetic critique that led to social reform which brought the community's form of life into conformity with God's reign of love whose public manifestation was justice, mercy, and peace.

In terms of my approach to the notion of the church as an agent of God's reign in the world, I share Roberts' suspicion of the church viewing itself as the arm of the Lord in the world. The experiences of black people in the Western world, along with even a

cursory reading of the biblical literature and church history, suggest that the slippery slope from agent of radical revolution on behalf of God's reign to agent of demonic, oppressive imperialism is a steep and easy slide indeed. Yet, I do affirm the words of the 24th Psalm – the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. Dale Andrews cites the creation narrative and its establishment of humanity's reflection of the *imago Dei* as one of the principal texts in the grand narrative of the story of God that grounds the black church's witness. This priority of the story of creation in establishing God's love and concern for the world is reinforced by Jesus' words to Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John – that God so loved *the world*.

South African missiologist David Bosch writes of an “emerging ecumenical paradigm” of mission, wherein over the last half-century Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical churches responded to the postmodern moment by reclaiming the pre-Christendom understanding of mission as *missio Dei*—God's active, loving movement toward the world of which the church is a sign and sacrament, a witness and an instrument.⁵⁸ Bosch argued that the prevailing consensus maintains the necessity of the church as both identifiable *in the world*, yet different *from the world* for the sake of its participation in God's mission *to the world*. In contrast to the “modern” practice of mission as the expansion of the church's institutional presence and power, the church's “postmodern” participation in the *missio Dei* has as its aim the “serving, healing, and

⁵⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

reconciling [of] a divided, wounded humanity.”⁵⁹ My understanding of the *missio Dei* is that missionary agency must be ascribed primarily to the Holy Spirit who is always busy in the work of re-creating the world, of remaking the world according to God's design of beauty, sufficiency, harmony, peace, equity, and justice – in a word, love.

Insofar as the Spirit directs the practices of the church into and with the world for the sake of refashioning the world towards that vision, then I can affirm the church's participation in movements that seek the transformation of the social order. As Roberts and Evans argued, the catholicity and apostolicity of the church must be characterized by a posture of reconciliatory embrace that witnesses to God's love in the world. Yet, as Evans points out, the church's holiness also dictates that it stand in firm opposition to the march of oppressive forces as an act of God's love on behalf of the oppressed. Additionally, in the balance of individuals and community, the black church should also understand the myriad and often overlooked ways the Holy Spirit calls and empowers individuals to be a part of God's re-creative act as a fulfillment of its mission. The primary way that the church witnesses to God's reign in the world is the conformity of its internal life according to the beauty of God's creation.

Although the HBCGCs described in this study are not churches, they offer insights into what a postmodern ecclesiology might mean for black churches in practice. HBCGCs demonstrate the necessity of the perpetuation of communal spaces whose purpose is forming a particularly black cultural consciousness – that is, an orientation

⁵⁹ Ibid., 494.

toward the world, the black community, and black selfhood that places black experiences at the center. If black churches are similarly dedicated to this kind of cultural preservation, then they must own up to this desire to attract and include people who identify themselves as black and whose varied experiences can contribute to the ongoing construction and negotiation of black communal identity. HBCGCs hold this orientation in tension with the ethical imperative to reject the kind of exclusivism that blacks felt at the hands of whites which necessitated the construction of separate space to begin with. If the black church is to witness against the ugliness and hatred of racial prejudice, it must find a way to maintain its identity as a distinctively black community without being a racially exclusionary community.

The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College were the best example of this approach in their combination of open welcome and narrative discipline. Anyone can join the group as long as they submit themselves to the narrative formation of the black Christian tradition. Different members of the community will interact with that tradition in various ways depending on their own particularity. However, as we have learned from Anderson and heard in the testimony of Kuumba's members, this is the case for black students and non-black students alike. It is to be expected that the strong emphasis in the black Christian tradition on identifying and rebuking racism will impact white members of the group differently than it will impact members who represent a racial minority group. The fierce rejection of white supremacy that the black witness to the gospel requires, and the intentional healing and fortification of black communal and individual self-worth and agency that is a part of the mission of the black church, may be interpreted by whites as

inhospitality. However, the experiences of white and other non-black members of Kuumba indicate that a commitment to black communal identity formation and ethical prioritization does not negate the open welcome that typifies the group's posture toward non-black "others." Those who remain in the group discover that this welcome is not for show; it is representative of a true openness to the inclusion of non-black members into this "black" family.

The combination of open welcome and narrative discipline necessitates clarity of mission on the part of the community's leaders. As witnessed in the Inner Strength Gospel Choir, the failure of leaders to recognize the importance of the racial distinctiveness of their Christian community led to an absence of the group's race-centered history in their communal discourse about the group's identity. Thus, their communal culture reflected a "naïve multiculturalism"⁶⁰ that appealed to color-blindness as a symbol of Christian love. This naïve multiculturalism assumes that a shared commitment to Christian faith makes black racial identification irrelevant to the group's communal identity. Because ISGC did not tell its foundational story as part of the intentional cultivation of its identity, it did not have the communal language with which to engage the very real implications of the choir's shifting racial demographics on the

⁶⁰ I borrow this term from Marla Frederick, who employs it to describe the façade of "color-blindness" that some black megachurches and televangelistic ministries project in their attempt to attract both non-blacks and blacks who do not want to belong to a black-identified church. Frederick claims that naïve multiculturalism reflects an individualistic orientation with regard to identity and a simplistic, interpersonal understanding of racism. See Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 153-157.

choir's ability to mediate the prophetic, counter-hegemonic aspects of black Christian faith.

In contrast, Kuumba's foundational narrative was ubiquitous within its cultural practice precisely because the group had experienced the disastrous results of trying to navigate through such changes without the compass of a normative story. And yet, the Kuumba story demonstrates that narrative discipline does not mean that the contemporary culture of the group must uncritically imitate the past. Novel communal and individual identity is strengthened as the testimonies of those who came before influence the formation of the testimonies of the present members. This is not a nostalgic use of the past. The attention to the social context of the past calls the community to attend to the implications of that racial history on its own context in the present. For Kuumba, this attention to narrative strengthened their efforts to maintain the familial ethos of black Christian community even as they welcomed others. The Third Day Gospel Choir demonstrated that this attention to the particularity of the black Christian historical narrative can be significant for the formation of individual consciousness even when the communal culture does not support a strong communal identity.

For black churches, this appeal to foundational narrative will be larger than the story of white racism. In this regard, I agree with the cultural approach to theology that emphasizes the need to cultivate black subjectivity independent of the struggle against white supremacy. The black church's understanding of God's work in the experiences of black people will begin with black people's embrace of the *imago Dei* as the foundation of black being [Andrews] and the abundant life offered by Jesus Christ as the telos of

black existence [Anderson]. At the same time, although it does not begin with white racism, the black witness to the gospel must address white supremacy as a demonic deformation of God's creation that must be named, restrained, and ultimately cast out.

The experiences of HBCGCs offer clues as to the practical implications of a postmodern black ecclesiology that melds an embrace of difference with a narrative discipline that preserves the distinctiveness of the black Christian tradition. Without an emphasis on the narrative that provides meaning to faith practices, the practices themselves cannot bear the load of sustaining the Christian character of a community. When the narrative is silent about the distinctiveness of the black communal witness to the gospel, then black church practices are in danger of losing their integrity as conduits of an encounter with "good news." If the black church obscures its narrative for the sake of being welcoming, then it will forfeit the very gift that it is supposed to be giving to the world and its witness will become an invitation to a dinner party at which there are tables and chairs, but no food. And the food that the black church offers is sorely needed in the contemporary postmodern context. As bell hooks describes:

Hopelessness creates longing for insight and strategies for change that can renew spirits and reconstruct grounds for collective black liberation struggle. The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition. Yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice.⁶¹

⁶¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 37.

The black Christian tradition harbors narrative, cultural, and institutional resources that it has used in the past to respond to the yearning of black people for spiritual renewal and to create communities of solidarity. Postmodern black ecclesiology asserts that this tradition lives and, if recalled and tended to, can also be adapted to a reconstructed notion of solidarity that is strengthened by difference. The critical exchanges that occur during the Kuumba “race talks,” with their vulnerable and searing confessions of offense, are incredible examples of authentic community working its way through the pain of difference—difference between blacks and others as well as difference among blacks themselves. This is no naïve multiculturalism that white-washes the pain of difference in order to highlight the beauty of diversity. Rather the beauty of diversity is revealed as the community confronts the truth about the divisions that difference can engender and moves through truth to genuine acceptance and love. This is black Christian community at its best.

CHAPTER SIX
A POSTMODERN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
OF EVANGELISM

Introduction

In the previous chapter on black postmodern ecclesiology, I defined the mission of the black church as bearing incarnational witness to the good news of the loving reign of God. By incarnational, I mean that the church's testimony is made public not merely through verbal proclamation but through holistic, embodied living that is faithful to the way of Jesus in particular social contexts. When I refer to making the gospel "public," I do not mean to insinuate that the gospel must be translated from the particular language of the church into a more general, universal form in order to be shared. To do so would be to invoke the false dichotomy between a private realm of subjective values and a public realm of objective facts, a dichotomy to which I do not subscribe. Rather, I use the term "to make public" in reference to the notion of publishing—the act by which knowledge is intentionally distributed to the public. The mission of the church, then, is to take the truth of God's reign—a truth harbored in the form of its gospel story—and make that truth visible and tangible in the world through the embodiment of the gospel in the church's faithful discipleship of Jesus.

The practice of "publishing" connotes more than revelation. Inherent in the act of publishing is the desire not only to make something known, but to make it available to others for their participation. The church's mission is to be a sign of the reign of God, revealing to the world that God's reign is both *real* and *present* (or, to use Jesus' term, "at

hand”). However, the church’s publishing of the gospel also entails an intentional invitation of others to join in living under God’s loving household rule. The church invites the world to participate in life under the reign of God by making the gospel intelligible (that is, contextualized) and accessible (that is, intentionally offered) through the church’s embodied witness. The concepts of witness and mission as I have formulated them are contiguous, yet distinguishable. I agree with Orlando Costas when he states that “not everything that the church does is evangelization [but] everything that the church *is* and everything that the church has been sent *to do* has an evangelistic dimension.”¹ Evangelism describes the invitational and intentionally engaging posture of the church as it encounters the world in mission. Evangelism is the church’s invitational extension of its witness beyond its confessional boundaries.

In this chapter, I will argue that from a black postmodern Christian perspective the church’s evangelistic posture should be one of openness to substantive, mutually-critical and transformative exchanges across the boundary lines between church and world which, transgressively, call those very boundaries into question. These exchanges, in whatever form they may take, comprise the practice of evangelism. The church’s engagement with the world through evangelism is always invitational in that the church seeks to involve others in the process of seeing and living into the vision of God for their lives. This incarnational and relational invitation does not seek the growth of the church’s membership as a primary goal, although it would welcome such an outcome.

¹ Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 136.

The real goal is that both parties in the exchange enlarge and sharpen their vision of God's purpose for God's creation and begin to live more faithfully into that purpose through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The heart of any theology of evangelism is its understanding of the nature and content of the gospel itself. Accordingly, the center of this chapter will be my discussion of Lesslie Newbigin's defense of the particularity of the Christian gospel in the context of religious pluralism. I will then bring Newbigin's depiction of the dialogical nature of cross-cultural mission into conversation with Bryan Stone's postliberal theology of evangelism in order to arrive at a narrativist confessional approach to evangelism that coheres with the postmodern black ecclesiology presented in the previous chapter. As a practical theology, this reflection on the nature and purpose of evangelism is grounded in my consideration of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white college campuses and the insights that this particular realm of experience brings to bear on an understanding of the relationship between the black Christian tradition and the cultural context of religious pluralism in which emerging generations are coming of age. Thus, the chapter will begin with an analysis of the ways that historically black collegiate gospel choirs extend the black Christian tradition outside the borders of the black church and how that experience is significant for my theological thinking about black churches' practice of evangelism.

Evangelistic Significance of Historically Black Collegiate Gospel Choirs

My research on HBCGCs is significant for the construction of a practical theology of evangelism because it describes concrete situations in which the black Christian tradition extends beyond the black church and encounters the world. Although HBCGCs are not churches, my theological analysis of their communal practices, communal culture, and the meaning-making of their members suggests that these groups make the black church's witness to the Christian gospel publicly visible, accessible, and intelligible in their respective university contexts. This witness occurs on three levels of engagement between HBCGCs and the university community. Each level discloses important dynamics in the interaction between the black Christian tradition and the university context as they encounter one another through the practices of HBCGCs.

First, HBCGCs witness to the university at-large through their institutional presence. Through their mere existence HBCGCs render black Christian worship practice and black Christian community (though in a complicated and contested way) as visible realities that must be taken into account in any comprehensive understanding of student life. In the case of the Harvard Kuumba Singers and Boston University's Inner Strength, their respective birth narratives testify that the institutional presence of these groups significantly mitigated the feelings of invisibility and marginalization that black students in general, and black Christian students in particular, experienced prior to their founding. In one of the only scholarly treatments of HBCGCs, Cheryl J. Sanders describes the importance of their institutional presence in the context of the black student protest movement of the 1960s and 1970s out of which the choirs sprung:

The cultural resistance of black students to the pressure to assimilate the particular values, practices, and attitudes of the university setting and the social classes it emulates has been a critical determinant of the success and distinctiveness of the gospel choir movement...

In the heat of protest, it was not unusual for the more secularized and politically-oriented black students to criticize the gospel choirs as counter-revolutionary. However, in retrospect these groups have manifested black awareness and identity in concrete, visible forms...

These choirs have provided a context for black students to give voice and rhythm to their exilic consciousness in the campus setting, by singing the Lord's song in a strange land of intellectual, social, cultural, and religious alienation.²

Sanders invokes the biblical exilic tradition to explain the role and function of HBCGCs in the life of black students on predominantly white university campuses. Just as Jews in the exilic diaspora preserved their unique identity through distinctive worship practices and patterns of life, so too did HBCGCs provide black students with communal structures that gave their unique cultural identity “concrete, visible forms” that aided them in resisting the alien values, practices, and attitudes of their surrounding university contexts, which the black protest movement identified as irreparably white supremacist and bourgeoisie. Sanders notes with some irony that although HBCGCs, with their focus on “worship and performance,” were dismissed by more radical black students as insufficient forms of resistance to white racism, it is now evident that the gospel choir movement “represents one of the most vital ongoing institutional expressions of the ubiquitous student rebellions of the late 1960s.”³

² Cheryl J. Sanders, “Resistance, Rebellion, and Reform: The Collegiate Gospel Choir Movement in the United States” in *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 27no. 1-2 (Fall-Spr 1999-2000), 210-211.

³ *Ibid.*, 210.

In this first level of engagement with the university setting at-large, the institutional persistence of HBCGCs bears witness to the black Christian tradition by sustaining a concrete, visible community gathered around black Christian worship practices that embody the black church's distinctive story of the creative, loving, liberating, sustaining, affirming, and joy-giving movement of God in the myriad experiences of black Americans. This historical narrative imbues the counter-cultural racial and religious significance of HBCGCs into the institutional witness of current HBCGCs, even those that were not founded as a part of the original black student protest movement. Choirs that were founded later, such as Tufts' Third Day, occupy the same functional space on their respective campuses in terms of their representation of the black Christian tradition. Students in different HBCGCs also form relationships with one another through joint concert appearances and joint practices. Thus, newer choirs like Third Day are grafted into the larger HBCGC tradition by practical and aesthetic association and become a part of that collective historical and cultural institutional witness.

This first level of institutional encounter between HBCGCs and the university context is a mutually critical and transformative exchange between the black Christian communal identity of the choirs and the institutional culture of the universities they inhabit. By asserting themselves as contexts for the cultivation of alternative communal consciousness through engagement in distinctively black Christian worship practices, the HBCGCs influence the communal culture of the universities by their very presence. However, in the case of each HBCGC that I studied their respective universities have also

appropriated the institutional presence of the choirs for their own purposes. Specifically, each choir is frequently showcased by their respective universities as an example of the cultural diversity of their respective institutions during periods of high visitation or high visibility. For example, Inner Strength Gospel Choir routinely sings for Boston University's annual celebration of one of its most famous alumni, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Third Day Gospel Choir outdoor concert has become a staple of Tufts University's parents' weekend programming; and the Kuumba Singers are frequently deployed by Harvard University to regale the high profile figures who visit the campus, from U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy and Vice President Joe Biden to South Africa's President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Although HBCGCs initially understood their mission as making sure that black students had a community to which they could belong *at* the university, their institutional status as campus organizations mean that they also belong *to* the university. As such, they are subject to the university's employment of their services in ways that impact the ongoing development of their communal identity. In the Kuumba Singers this dynamic is manifested in the leaders' attempt to preserve their preferred identification as a "black" organization in defiance of the university's advertisement of the group as Harvard's largest "multi-cultural" organization. The Inner Strength Gospel Choir wrestles with its stated purpose of "spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ" and Boston University's strict enforcement of its policy against proselytizing. This struggle was most evident at the tail end of David Coleman's tenure as director when he was challenged by the university chaplain to suspend the altar calls (or, invitations to Christian discipleship) that took

place at the conclusion of ISGC concerts. The group continues to negotiate this issue in less public ways as its student leaders vacillate regarding the purpose of the pre-rehearsal gathering: is it a stress-free environment to build community or is it a context for intentional Christian discipleship? In Tufts' Third Day Gospel Choir the gravitational pull of the tension regarding institutional identity flows in the other direction. Since the group was established as an academic course, the question becomes how much influence will the black Christian tradition that is imbedded in the group's practice have on communal identity? Although it is embodied powerfully in the musical experience and the presentation of the director, we hear Jasmine and Nicholas both lament that Third Day's institutional identity as an academic course—an elective, no less!—overpowers the impact of the black Christian tradition on the communal culture, which both students felt minimized the *gravitas* of the experience. However, as both Nicholas and director David Coleman highlighted, the association of the group as more of a class than a community of faith practice is a key determinant of the group's effectiveness at introducing the black sacred music tradition to non-Christian students.

This exchange between HBCGCs and the university context on the level of institutional identity need not be understood as a regrettable dilution of the black Christian tradition in the life of HBCGCs. Instead, the exchange is the byproduct of the necessary risk involved in creating institutionally recognizable homes for black Christian community on campus. While HBCGCs were founded as subversive entities that provided an alternative, sub-cultural community within the antagonistic white university context, the power of their persistent institutional presence helped to realize the initial

goal of their founders—the acknowledgement of the value of black culture and black experience as well as the acceptance and inclusion of black students into the campus life and communal consciousness of the university at-large. Had the founders of the Kuumba Singers or Inner Strength Gospel Choir been content with meeting privately as unofficial groups, then they would not have achieved the necessary institutional visibility to bear witness to their presence both to the university at-large as well as to other black Christian students who needed to know that they could indeed sing the Lord's song in this strange land.

Even though the integrity of the communal identity of HBCGCs as alternative communities of black Christian faith practice is somewhat compromised by their interaction and appropriation by the universities, the exchange is a qualitative improvement of the experience of black students as well as the universities' campus culture. The Tufts community is better because it recognizes the positive impact that seeing over two hundred fifty students singing the vibrant, spirit-filled gospel music of Third Day will have on the parents who visit campus. The Harvard community is better because when it seeks to present the best of its campus life it chooses to highlight the diversity that was forged through the protest and struggle of black students. The Boston University community is better because it recognizes that no MLK celebration can be complete without inviting Inner Strength to invoke the worship of the black church, the spiritual and institutional home for Dr. King's life and work. HBCGCs cultivate a community of difference within the predominantly white, nonsectarian university. However, by making their community of difference publicly visible on an institutional

level, HBCGCs are able to *make a difference* in the broader culture of their universities. In exchange, HBCGCs open themselves up to the characteristically exilic negotiation between cultivating distinctive, alternative communal identity and participation in the life of the dominant culture.

By giving the black Christian tradition an institutional presence on their respective campuses, HBCGCs enter into a transformative exchange with the institutional culture of their universities whereby the communal identity of both parties are impacted in response to their relationship with the other. Due to the nature of this study, which focuses on the activities and attitudes of the members and leaders of the choirs, it is difficult to demonstrate the degree to which they have transformed their respective universities on this level of institutional engagement. A fuller treatment of this macro-level exchange would require a much broader range of data including historical documents and artifacts as well as interviews with key informants from within the university administration whose tenure spans the life-cycle of the respective choirs. However, I include this level of engagement through institutional presence in the discussion because of the profound impact that navigating these organizational and bureaucratic complexities has on the experience of the officers and directors of the choirs as they attempt to safeguard the mission of the groups they lead. Thus, while the study did not yield an abundance of information regarding the ways that these HBCGCs have transformed the universities they inhabit on an institutional level, the few examples that did emerge point to the reality of this level of exchange as a part of the overall interaction

between the black Christian faith tradition and the university context that is mediated through the presence of HBCGCs on campus.

The second level of engagement through which HBCGCs bear witness to the black Christian tradition in the university context is the mutually critical and transformative exchange that occurs between the choirs and their audiences through the act of performance. In some ways, this kind of engagement is the most constitutive of the three levels with respect to the identity and purpose of HBCGCs. As David Coleman referenced in his reflection on the significance of HBCGCs, they are descendants of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers who were organized in the late 1870s with the expressed mission of exposing the music of the black church to white audiences, most of whom would be encountering that tradition for the first time. Coleman surmised that this dynamic is still fundamental to the HBCGC concert experience based on an informal poll that he conducts at the beginning of each concert. Coleman reported that during his tenure at Tufts University over half of the audience at each Third Day Gospel Choir concert indicated that they had never heard a gospel choir before. Furthermore, while gospel music was quite at home in the Sanctified and Pentecostal churches in its early years, it was resisted by most mainline black churches because of the association of its syncopated African rhythms with the blues and jazz of the dancehalls. Gospel music was also shunned because its exuberant performance harkened the “shout” of slave religion, which many black mainliners eschewed in accordance with the politics of respectability that they believed necessary for upward social mobility. Even once gospel music was embraced by the vast majority of black churches, gospel choirs and small ensembles still

considered the concert stage a second home. Thus, the act of ‘publishing’ the sacred music of the black church to those outside that particular faith tradition has been integral to the HBCGC tradition from its inception.

The evangelistic significance of this second level of engagement goes beyond the phenomenological observation that HBCGCs present their audience members with songs from the black Christian worship tradition. As I developed in the previous chapter, my theological interpretation of the concert performances of HBCGCs asserts that they constitute occasions of genuine worship that invite audience members into communion with the Spirit of God as the Spirit is active through the music, lyrics, visual art, dance, verbal testimony and group performance aesthetics of the choirs. Although I make this claim from my own interpretive vantage point, it is consistent with the description of several research participants who stated that the impetus for them joining their respective choir was an experience of divine encounter during their attendance at a previous concert.

To be sure, not every audience member accepts the invitation to interpret and participate in the concert as a worship experience. Nor, for that matter, do all of the choir members share that interpretation. Nevertheless, it is significant that the concerts represent one of the only occasions where persons from outside of the black church community will witness and experience black Christian worship practice in person. Throughout the course of a concert, the audience will be invited to stand on their feet and clap their hands. They will be directed to join the choir in a call and response section of a song. They will hear the testimony of the student who introduces a song by sharing how the song helped them “get over” during a difficult time in the semester. They will hear a

poetry reading or an extemporaneous exhortation regarding the biblical, cultural, and historical significance of the concert's theme. They will have their breath taken away by the beauty of the praise dancers as they interpret the power of a song through their bodily movements. They will fix their eyes on a choir member as she lifts her hands heavenward in praise with tears of joy flowing down her face. They will watch a soloist who has spent all his energy interpreting a song collapse into the restorative embrace of another. Whether an audience member is a parent supporting a child or a student cheering on a roommate, before the night is over they will have witnessed authentic worship in the black Christian tradition.

As with the first level of engagement through institutional presence, engagement through public presentation is also a mutually transformative exchange between the black Christian tradition and the social context in which it is being presented. While HBCGCs attempt to present as faithful a rendering of the black sacred music tradition as possible, it is just that—a *rendering*. What they offer is a representation of a worship practice outside its natural *habitus*. This fact influences the decisions that the directors and student leaders make regarding what to present and how to present it. When discussing song selection, Kuumba director Sheldon Reid stated, “Audience makes a difference. A black church will connect with a song that a Harvard audience won’t. You need to break down their walls and get them to feel it. You don’t [start] with that assumed connection.” Reid mentioned during our interview that one of his goals with his student directors is developing this discernment regarding not only song selection, but also song placement in the order of the concert in order to coax an audience toward a deeper engagement than

they may have expected to experience when they arrived. David Coleman and Herb Jones expressed similar sentiments regarding the differences in their choice of music for the HBCGCs with which they work in contrast to the church communities they serve in music ministry. While a content analysis of the song lyrics in each choir's repertoire extends beyond the scope of this study, these directors attest that the music presented in concert is selected with a concern for the accessibility of its content to a non-church audience. Thus, the context of presentation forces the directors and their student leaders to be self-critical about what aspects of the black Christian music tradition to share and how to share it. HBCGCs do not simply transplant black Christian worship into the university setting. The act of presenting black Christian worship practice outside the black church context changes the nature of the practice. However, just because the resultant rendering of the black Christian tradition is not a comprehensive representation, it is not precluded from being a faithful representation.

The third level of engagement through which HBCGCs bear witness to the black Christian tradition, and the one that is most salient for my argument, is the inclusion in their membership of those who do not belong to the black Christian faith tradition. These students encounter the black Christian tradition through their participation in the worship practice of singing black Christian sacred music. Through this participation, students are educated about the biblical, historical, and cultural narrative of black Christian faith because the leaders of the HBCGCs regard engagement with that narrative as a necessary component of responsible and meaningful appropriation of black sacred music in the university context. Whether it be through Inner Strength's "Friends and Fellowship"

meetings, the “race talks” of the Kuumba Singers, or the numerous sermons that Third Day members hear from David Coleman—the music that these choirs sing is intentionally situated in the varieties of black Christian experience that comprise the black church’s witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Most importantly, HBCGCs include these racial and religious “others” in their unique form of black Christian community. The black Christian faith tradition is not a free-floating set of stories and practices. Rather, the black Christian faith tradition is concretely actualized as narrative and practice find their communal embodiment as the black church faithfully enacts its identity and mission as part of the family of God. To the degree that HBCGCs are successful in maintaining a communal culture that reflects their familial inheritance from the black church, they offer their members a context for the formation of relational bonds that are characterized by genuine love and deep respect. Without these relationships, the exchange between the black Christian tradition and the individual choir members would only occur as internal dialogue. However, when the choirs’ communal culture fosters strong relational bonds, the members are driven to engage one another regarding their racial and religious differences. Recall the reflections of Nicholas regarding the importance of relationships to his participation in Third Day and the Kuumba Singers:

I think as far as the members, you’re being challenged in a lot of ways in the conversations that you have about race, about faith and stuff. And it forces you to have that kind of internal dialogue with yourself about, “Well, what do I believe?”...And I see them very much as places where those things are crossed and transcended, in the best sense of the word, where true bonds are made, where white people know what it means to be an ally now. So, they’re able to talk very intelligently, talk about racial stuff and have a vocabulary with which to discuss it. And I think that’s

very rare. But only these types of spaces, where it can open people up in that way, both for white people to be receptive and for black people to feel open to share their experiences. To create those contexts where that can happen is very rare. And, obviously, the faith piece of it as well...So, it wasn't just an internal thing with me. I've been able to do that with other people, other members of the group.

Each of the research participants expressed similar sentiments regarding the impact of their relationships within the choir on their own negotiation of their racial and/or religious identity. In each case, the exchange resulted in both parties engaging in self-critical reflection that would not have transpired without that relational encounter. Those relational encounters are both instigated and enabled by the influence of the black church's ethos of familial love on the communal culture of the HBCGCs.

While HBCGCs continue to bear incarnational witness to the black Christian tradition through institutional presence, the public presentation of black Christian worship practice, and the cultivation of relationally loving black Christian community, HBCGCs have evolved into communal spaces that are attractive to students whose identities fall along a wide spectrum of racial and religious difference. This dynamic has proven to be a communally disruptive force on occasion, as I discussed in relation to the communal fissures in the recent history of the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College and Boston University's Inner Strength Gospel Choir. At the same time, my research indicates that these demographic shifts have transformed these HBCGCs into unique social contexts for the development of meaningful relationships and substantive dialogue between choir members of different racial and religious affiliations. Identifying the conditions under which that diversity results in communal strength as opposed to

communal disarray will yield valuable insights for the consideration of a practical theology of evangelism for black churches in the postmodern cultural context.

In order to make sense of the attraction of college students to these communities of black Christian faith expression, we must account for the role of the university context in the spiritual development of college students overall. "Spirituality is fundamental to [college] students' lives."⁴ So argue Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm in *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (2011), in which they publish the findings of their seven year study of the role of spirituality in the lives of over 40,000 college students from over 200 different institutions of higher education. Among the many important findings of this study, the most salient for the purposes of this discussion are summarized in the following passage:

Despite what seems to be a growing materialism and declining concern with existential questions among our college students, the study reported in this book shows that most students still maintain a strong interest in spiritual and religious matters. Fully four in five students tell us that they "have an interest in spirituality" and that they "believe in the sacredness of life," and nearly two-thirds say that "my spirituality is a source of joy." Students also hold strong religious beliefs. More than three-fourths believe in God, and more than two and three say that their religious/spiritual beliefs "provide me with strength, support, and guidance." Finally, three-fourths of the students report feeling a "sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self."⁵

The authors contrast this interest in spirituality with college students' sharp decline in attendance at religious services and other forms of engagement in organized religion.

⁴ Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

According to the study, frequent attendance at religious services drops from 44% while in high school to 25% during college and complete non-attendance nearly doubles from 20% in high school to 38% during college.⁶ The authors also report that this decline in religious engagement correlates strongly with the decline in “religious/social conservatism,” a category that includes students’ attitudes regarding the practice of evangelism.⁷ My qualitative research yielded narrative data that reflect the findings conveyed in *Cultivating the Spirit*. The students with whom I spoke were generally open to the exploration of their spirituality, but not committed to doing so within the confines of traditional religious structures.

Given this understanding of the spiritual and religious landscape on college and university campuses, HBCGCs are unique in that they are "extra-ecclesial" entities—meaning that they offer students the opportunity to engage in a definitively ecclesial faith practice outside of the institutional church context. Without the foundation of a gathered, identifiable church community, the untethered worship practice itself bears the weight of the faith tradition and transports the tradition into a new communal space that is not confessionally bound. When confessional fealty is not perceived as a condition of participation in the faith practice, then the resultant community is more open to the participation of religious others than an identifiable ecclesial community. This is the main distinction between HBCGCs and campus ministry organizations in the context of campus student life. While HBCGCs are “extra-ecclesial” communities engaging in faith

⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁷ Ibid., 92-93.

practice, the campus ministries are “para-church” organizations whose internally articulated purpose and public reputations are more tightly bound to their confessional identities as church-affiliated communities. That is not to say that the public perception of HBCGCs is completely void of the Christian character of their communal life. However, potential members do not necessarily assume that they must be Christian to sing in HBCGCs in the same manner as they assume that to be an expectation in campus ministries. Nor do they believe that conversion to Christianity is the goal of participation in HBCGCs, as opposed to campus ministries in which conversion to Christianity is openly stated as the goal. Furthermore, as Alice’s experience with a campus ministry exemplified, when campus ministries try to counteract this impression by initially inviting students to events that do not foreground their mission to “win” students for Christ, they risk alienating those students when their ultimate intentions are eventually made known.

The boundary line that I am tracing between HBCGCs and campus ministries is not a categorical one based on official mission statements, but a practical difference based on the experience of students. This is an important caveat since each of the HBCGCs displays some inconsistency between their explicit mission and the practical experience of their communal culture. For example, while the Inner Strength Gospel Choir includes “spreading the gospel through music” in its statement of purpose, the overwhelming attitude of the members I interviewed as well as my own observation of the choir’s communal culture indicate that students experience the group as open and welcoming of non-Christians and that the Christian members generally do not seek the

conversion of non-Christian members to Christianity. Conversely, the Kuumba Singers, while explicitly rejecting any exclusive commitment to Christianity in its official purpose statement and in the ubiquitous retellings of its founding narrative, is yet perceived by most of its members as a functionally Christian community. The study even yielded some evidence that Kuumba's Christian communal character is an impediment to some non-Christians who are invited to join. However, the study also showed that the non-Christian members in Kuumba appreciated the respect they received from the Christian members with regard to their freedom to interpret their participation through their own religious or non-religious perspectives. This hermeneutic freedom was critical to non-Christians' ability to feel truly at home in the group. The same dynamic is evident in Third Day where that interpretive freedom is assumed because of the organizational identity of the group as an academic course.

Even given this caveat and the organizational and cultural idiosyncrasies that distinguish the three HBCGCs in the study, the evangelistic significance of my research is that these extra-ecclesial communities are each able to cultivate communal and institutional identities that achieve sufficient distance from the confessional bounds of the Black Church so as to attract religious others who would not feel as comfortable in churches or campus ministries, while at the same time engaging those very members in substantive, meaningful participation in a communal Christian faith practice alongside those who call the black church their spiritual home. Driven by the influence of the black church tradition on the faith practice and the personal witness of individual black Christian members, the choirs' familial character nurtures the development of deep,

loving relationships between people of racial and religious difference. Those relationships allow for the mutually critical and transformative exchange that results in both parties enlarging their experience and perception of God.

Religious Pluralism, the Nature of the Gospel, and the Problem of Dialogue

Although the communal culture of HBCGCs encourages and enables the interpersonal relationships between choir members of different faith traditions to lead toward substantive dialogue, critical reflection, and productive transformation, such an outcome is not guaranteed. The choirs' engagement with issues of religious difference sometimes results in conflict, as in the 1999 exodus of many Christian members from the Harvard Kuumba Singers, the charges of inappropriate proselytizing at BU's Inner Strength concerts in the late 1990s, or the controversy regarding communal prayer in Third Day prior to David Coleman's arrival in 2006. However, during the course of my research, the more common alternative to productive critical engagement of religious difference was not conflict, but avoidance. I recall Nicholas' lament that neither Third Day nor the Kuumba Singers provided adequate opportunities for intentional communal engagement with the issue of religious diversity in their respective choirs. When I asked his opinion about why others did not desire to confront the issue of religious difference as much as he did, Nicholas speculated, "It's less of a hot-button thing. People are more accepting of the idea of a multi-faith environment than a multi-racial one." I have also discussed above the paradox of Inner Strength's stated mission to provide students a context for Christian discipleship with the testimony of several choir members who

proudly boast about their indifference to the religious affiliation of fellow choir members as a testament to the welcoming and loving nature of the group's communal culture. These observations and responses are indicative of the "high level of religious tolerance and acceptance" that typifies the vast majority of college students' approach to religious diversity.⁸

The religious tolerance that college students adhere to is indicative of the dominant influence of relativism in the postmodern cultural context in which they are coming of age. In *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (2011), Christian Smith and his collaborators report that among the emerging adults (ages 18-23) included in the third round of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), 47% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "morals are relative, there are not definite rights and wrongs for everybody," while 30% of interview subjects ascribed to a "strong" moral relativism that deems the identification of moral truth an impossibility.⁹ Relatedly, 60% of those interviewed expressed highly individualistic approaches to morality.

This distinction between moral relativism and moral individualism is an important one. Strict moral relativism makes the epistemological claim that there is no objective, universally valid truth, understanding morality as a matter of context-dependent, socially constructed subjective opinion. Moral individualism posits that determining truth is a matter of personal decision for personal application. While moral individualism has

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27-28.

“strong intellectual affinities with moral relativism,” Smith et. al. found that most emerging adults rejected the radical implication of relativism by identifying certain moral claims as absolute.¹⁰ However, because of their strict adherence to moral individualism, the majority of emerging adults believe that even these absolute moral claims must be kept private and never imposed on others.¹¹ Thus, even though radical relativism as a formal epistemological claim is embraced by only 30% of emerging adults (still a significant number!), the impact of relativism as a *cultural value* reinforces the individualism that is common among many emerging adults.

The authors of *Lost in Transition* observe that the ethical deliberation of emerging adults is largely untethered from the tradition of the communities of faith to which they belong. Although 40% of interviewees claimed that their views were based on God or the Bible and an additional 24% stated that religion provided general ethical influence, Smith et. al. clarify that “we would be wrong to believe, based on these numbers, that all or most of these emerging adults understand, embrace, and live out religiously coherent moral traditions and practices.”¹² The combination of the cultural force of relativism and individualism counteract the normative impact of the religious traditions that are supposed to provide the basis for ethical deliberation and guide them in making sense of the world. The result, according to Smith et. al. is a dangerous nihilism that leaves many emerging adults morally adrift. With no confidence in the truthfulness of their own

¹⁰ Ibid, 28-29.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 47.

traditions, too many emerging adults exhibit not only the “live-and-let-live lifestyle” associated with postmodern pluralism, but also a “live-and-let-*die* lifestyle” that takes little responsibility for helping others or opposing evil because they have no communal or moral basis for doing so.¹³

Smith et. al. lay the blame for this state of affairs not at the feet of emerging adults, but at those of the adults in charge of their faith formation. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—the term that Smith and his NSYR researchers use to describe the common pseudo-religious outlook of American teenagers—is not a divergence from the faith of their parents, but a direct reflection of the inconsequential brand of Christianity that pervades the American church.¹⁴ In *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (2010) Kenda Creasy Dean, another NSYR researcher under Smith, lampoons the American church as “the church of benign whatever-ism,” whose adults “treat Jesus like an embarrassing relative, someone we introduce with apologies to alleviate others’ (or is it our?) discomfort—that is, if we introduce him at all.”¹⁵ Although the church’s reticence to bear witness to the gospel in the fullness of its Christ-centered particularity is purportedly an attempt to find common ground and maintain good relationships with others in a culturally and religiously diverse society,

¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴ Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.

¹⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.

Dean exposes this approach as fundamentally self-centered. Teenagers learn to “instinctively apply a veneer of noncommittal niceness...that gives a permissive shrug to difference (“whatever”) and avoids particularities hinting at ultimate loyalties. What niceness masks, however, is our tendency to reduce others to replicas of ourselves.”¹⁶ The combination of relativism and individualism create a paradoxical religious pluralism that claims appreciation of religious diversity but then uses the cultural value of “appreciation” as a pretext for voiding the very particularities that make faith traditions different. Thus, the “benign whatever-ism” of American churches instills in its young neither a full understanding of their own faith tradition nor an authentic respect for others.

During this period of cultural transition, the religious pluralism of emerging adults reflects both modern and postmodern tendencies that impair Christian evangelism in different ways. In its modernist form, religious pluralism seeks to value all religions as valid paths that lead to the same God and views “evangelizing those of other faiths [as] a misplaced proselytism from a colonialist age.”¹⁷ In *Mission-Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture* (2010) Steve Hollinghurst argues that “in truth, modernist pluralism is probably the ultimate expression of the belief in western colonial superiority, and its advocacy a hidden form of proselytism.”¹⁸ Modern pluralism

¹⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

¹⁷ Steve Hollinghurst, *Mission-Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2010), 176.

¹⁸ Ibid., 178.

achieves harmony among different religions by “elevating western [philosophical] liberalism to an objective position from which the world’s faiths are judged.”¹⁹

Postmodern pluralism, on the other hand, understands truth as subjective and honors the particularity of each religious tradition as harboring a distinct worldview unto itself.²⁰

The postmodern approach avoids the imperialist, universalizing impulse of modernity by committing to genuine appreciation of religious diversity. However, it provides no ideological basis for sorting through the differences that arise in a religiously diverse society. Religious pluralism in both its modern and postmodern articulations deforms evangelism by impoverishing the church’s conception of the gospel it bears witness to. For the modernist, the gospel may be good but it is not news, since it is simply an expression of what the whole world already believes. For the postmodernist, the gospel remains news—a particular and different account of the world—but it is only good for Christians and not the rest of the world.

My postmodern practical theology of evangelism relies heavily on how Lesslie Newbigin wrestles with this issue in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).²¹ In the face of an increasingly pluralist western culture, Newbigin defends the claim of the gospel that God has revealed ultimate truth for the whole world in and through Jesus Christ. He begins his apology by noting that the new ideological commitment to

¹⁹ Ibid., 177.

²⁰ Ibid., 178.

²¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

relativism applies only to “values.” Other forms of knowledge—particularly the objects of physical scientific study—are labeled “facts” and are still considered to be objectively, universally true for all people. Newbigin references Michael Polanyi’s critique of scientific positivism in which he argues that all human communities, whether scientific or otherwise, assume certain *a priori* beliefs that serve as the plausibility structures upon which they base the validity of all other knowledge and according to which that knowledge is encountered and interpreted. Accordingly, Newbigin argues that Christians may have confidence in the gospel because the church’s claim to the ultimacy of the gospel’s truth is no different from the *a priori* claims of any other human community.²² The ultimacy of Christ cannot be validated by any other truth because it is the truth that makes sense of all of history.

Newbigin’s defense of the epistemological ground for the gospel’s validity accounts for the basic insight of postmodern relativism without succumbing to the paralyzing self-absorption of its individualistic dimension. Newbigin accepts that “there is no such thing as a pure gospel,” a gospel disembodied from specific, particular cultures.²³ While Newbigin advocates for the uniqueness of the gospel story, he adds that “the way in which any Christian perceives God’s revelation in Christ and in the whole biblical story will be shaped by the culture through which that individual was formed.”²⁴ Although this move is indicative of the postmodern turn to the subjectivity of truth, it is

²² Ibid., 38.

²³ Ibid., 144.

²⁴ Ibid., 192.

also a rebuke of the modern Enlightenment notion of the autonomous self as the central locus of subjectivity. Newbigin argues that the meaning of history as revealed in the gospel is essentially communal, encompassing not only whole cultures but, indeed, all of humanity for all time. Thus, to receive the gospel is to relativize one's own culture and its interpretation of history, accepting in its place the Christian story and its interpretation of oneself and one's culture.

Newbigin acknowledges the paradox of his argument that the gospel accepts and is imbedded in culture, *and yet* stands against culture in judgment. As a theoretical dilemma, it is a formidable challenge to Newbigin's defense of biblical faith: "Where do I find the stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of the Bible when my reading of the Bible is itself so much shaped by the person that I am, formed by my culture?"²⁵ Newbigin concludes that the answer can only be found in the mutually critical dialogue of churches across cultures. This is Newbigin's imperative both for the continuance of cross-cultural mission *and* for the resistance of the cultural imperialism that has previously typified such mission. On the one hand, the only way to discern the truth is through the revelation offered by God in Christ as we receive it in the scriptural witness. On the other hand, "the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretations of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures."²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 196.

²⁶ Ibid., 196-197.

Newbigin points to the history of the 20th century missionary movement as an example of how the gospel relativizes both the culturally-conditioned Christian tradition of the western missionaries and the cultural/religious traditions of the civilizations to which they were sent.²⁷ The gospel of Jesus was new to these cultures and their reception of it necessarily required the transformation of their self-identity, their beliefs, and their practices. However, the ways in which these new Christians adopted and adapted the Christian tradition did not always conform to the colonial design of the missionaries. Through this process the missionaries were challenged to reconsider how much of their understanding of Christian discipleship was really a product of their cultural interpretation and, certainly in the case of their acceptance of colonialism and slavery, *misinterpretation*. The missionary encounter is one of mutually critical exchange whereby the Spirit of God uses the encounter to move both parties closer toward the reign of God. Based on this missionary experience, Newbigin concludes: “This mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but it is necessary and it is fruitful. As so often, the answer to the complex questions about the relation of the gospel to human culture has to be a practical one and not merely a theoretical one.”²⁸ Ultimately, Newbigin concedes that the strongest intellectual argument for explaining how the mutually critical exchange of cross-cultural mission *can happen* is simply to point to the practical reality that it already *does happen*.

²⁷ Ibid., 184-190.

²⁸ Ibid., 197.

If mutually critical exchange is to serve as the model for faithful witness to the gospel in a pluralist context, then we must show not only that it *does* happen but that it *should* happen from the perspective of the Christian tradition itself. Newbigin argues that the New Testament vision of mission casts the Spirit as the primary actor who works both *through* the church and *on* the church in order to bring about the fullness of the reign of God, of which the church is a sign and foretaste. Newbigin makes this point most clearly in his reflection on Johannine tradition:

[The disciples] are promised the presence of the Spirit, who will himself be the witness and by whose presence they also will be witnesses (John 15:18)... The Holy Spirit will lead the Church into ever fuller understanding of the truth—beyond what it was possible for the incarnate Lord to communicate to that group of disciples limited to one time and place and culture (John 16:12-15)... In this sense, as the mission goes its way to the ends of the earth new treasures are brought into the life of the Church, and Christianity itself grows and changes until it becomes more credible as a foretaste of the unity of all humankind... The fulfillment of the mission of the Church thus requires that the Church itself be changed and learn new things.²⁹

Newbigin highlights that nearly all of the instances of the proclamation of the gospel in Acts are in response to discussions initiated by those outside the church: Peter's sermon at Pentecost, testimonies from Stephen and other disciples on trial, Philip's scripture study with the Ethiopian, Peter's meeting with Cornelius' household, and Paul's preaching in synagogues at Antioch and Pisidia.³⁰ God was certainly at work through the ministry of the disciples; but God was also already at work in the people to whom they were sent. Every example of cross-cultural mission involved the critical transformation

²⁹ Ibid., 123-124.

³⁰ Ibid., 116-117.

of both the evangelized and the evangelists in response to their encounter of the Spirit of God at work in the other.

Newbigin is careful not to dissolve the church's missionary witness into these examples centered on the act of proclamation. To the contrary, he focuses attention on the fact that the paradigmatic proclamation at Pentecost occurred in response to the crowd's observance of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the worshipping community. Newbigin describes Paul's criterion for successful mission as having "left behind communities of men and women who believe the gospel and live by it."³¹ Paul's goal was not simply the effective proclamation of the gospel or the conversion of as many people as possible; his goal was to create communities that could faithfully incarnate the gospel in their own region once he was gone. And yet, Newbigin points out that these instances of faithful incarnation altered and stretched the boundaries of the church's communal identity as the Jewish church learned to "accept that the Gentiles, as Gentiles and not as Jewish proselytes, were to be part of the new community."³² The model of mission as mutually critical and transformative exchange applies not only on the level of interpersonal interaction, but also on the level of communal formation and visible, institutional presence.

According to Newbigin, the logic of mission that arises from an examination of the New Testament is eschatological and doxological. Mission is eschatological in that its aim is not the fulfillment of any human project – whether conversions to Christianity,

³¹ Ibid., 121.

³² Ibid., 124.

the numerical growth of the church, the attainment of human development, or the transformation of society into a more just order; rather, its aim is the fullness of God's reign.³³ Certainly, the commitment of persons to following the way of Jesus or the achievement of equality and justice for the oppressed are reasons for the church to rejoice. But the faithfulness of the church's witness to the reign of God cannot be measured by their attainment or lack thereof. The coming of the reign of God is not a mission that humans bring about; it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, the church is not in any way expendable or incidental to God's activity. Says Newbigin:

The mission of the Church to all the nations, to all human communities in all their diversity and in all their particularity, is itself the mighty work of God, the sign of the inbreaking of the kingdom. The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ. When they are so drawn, they become part of a community which claims no masterful control of history, but continues to bear witness to the real meaning and goal of history by a life which – in Paul's words – by always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus becomes the place where the risen life of Jesus is made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10).³⁴

The church in and of itself is not a sign of the reign of God. Instead, the church *becomes* a sign of the inbreaking of the reign of God as it engages the world in missionary encounter through the agency of the Spirit. As others are drawn to the church's witness of Jesus Christ, the church is not in control of the outcome. As stated above, the outcome will most likely not be a replica of the evangelizing community, but will reflect the uniqueness and particularity of the fresh encounter with God by those to whom the

³³ Ibid., 126.

³⁴ Ibid., 119.

church was sent. That fresh encounter, that new witness will in turn reveal to the evangelizing community the transgressive, barrier-breaking, and untamable reaches of the gospel. Thus is the church itself evangelized through the missionary encounter as its vision of the reign of God expands beyond the prior limits of its communal imagination. In this way, the mutually critical and transformative exchange that occurs between the Christian tradition and the world ensures that the gospel, while a particular story, never remains a parochial story. The church is prevented from short-sighted gazing down at its own navel as the missionary encounter lifts church's eyes and focuses its vision on "the true horizon [which] is not at the successful end of our projects, but in [Christ's] coming to reign."³⁵

The logic of mission is doxological in that its motivation and purpose is to glorify God. Newbigin wonderfully describes the dawn of the church's mission as "the radioactive fallout from an explosion of joy."³⁶ Mission is an expression of love born out of the church's experience of the unsurpassable love of God in Christ. Newbigin puts the point this way:

As Paul says, the love of Christ constrains us. We have been reconciled to God through the atoning love of Christ, and therefore we have an obligation to share that love with all for whom he died... The one who has been called and loved by the Lord, the one who wishes to love and serve the Lord, will want to be where he is. And where he is is on that frontier which runs between the kingdom of God and the usurped power of the evil one. When Jesus sent out his disciples on his mission, he showed them his hands and his side. They will share in his mission as they share in his passion, as they follow him in challenging and unmasking the powers of

³⁵ Ibid., 126.

³⁶ Ibid., 127.

evil. There is no other way to be with him. At the heart of mission is simply the desire to be with him and to give him the service of our lives.³⁷

The doxological *telos* of mission points again to the centrality of an outward looking posture to the church's identity as the body of Christ. Because Jesus' identity was defined by his mission to reveal the reconciling love of God to the world, then the church's worship of Jesus propels the church into loving service of the world. The church's faithful discipleship of Jesus requires that its witness to the loving reign of God goes beyond the embodiment of that reign in the life of the church to include direct confrontation and subversion of the evil powers that claim destructive, death-dealing, and idolatrous authority over God's creation.

In Newbigin's description of this confrontation, it is important to note that the battle line is not drawn between the church and the world, but between the reign of God and the power of evil. For in the missionary encounter, the Holy Spirit utilizes the exchange to unmask the power of evil and illuminate the presence of God's love both in the church and in the world. Here again, understanding the biblical logic of mission is critical as "it may be asked: if it is true that those who die without faith in Christ are not necessarily lost, and it is also true that those who are baptized Christians are not necessarily saved, what is the point of missions?"³⁸ Newbigin addresses this question by reflecting on Romans 9-11, where we find what Newbigin considers to be Paul's most developed theology of mission:

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Here the center of the picture is the eschatological event in which the fullness of the Gentiles will have been gathered in and all Israel will be saved. This is in spite of the fact that the vast majority of Jews have rejected the gospel, and that the event to which Paul looks forward will certainly occur long after the death of the unbelieving Jews. Plainly Paul is not thinking in terms of the individual but in terms of the interpretation of universal history. The center of the picture is the eschatological event in which the fathomless depths of God's wisdom and grace will be revealed. His ways are inscrutable and his judgments unsearchable. He has consigned all men to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32-36). Until that day none can share in God's perfection. Until that day, we are all on the way.³⁹

According to the eschatological *telos* of mission, the question regarding individuals' life after death poses a matter to the church that is properly reserved as a matter only for God.

The eschatological motivation for mission is the church's hope that God's grace is sufficient and that by God's wisdom all of creation—past, present, and future—is ultimately subject to the power of God's redeeming and reconciling love. This eschatological hope frees the church both from “anxiety about our failure [and from] boasting about our success.”⁴⁰ All that remains is the doxological motive of mission which is simply to praise and glorify God out of an abundance of love and joy.

A Narrativist Confessional Approach to Christian Tradition in Postmodern Theology of Evangelism

Lesslie Newbigin's theology of mission has had a great impact on the development of Western European and North American theologies of evangelism. Newbigin proposed that the principles learned from the experience of cross-cultural

³⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

mission should be applied to the practice of evangelism within countries that had previously thought of themselves as "Christian nations" but which had become increasingly secularized. The Gospel and Our Culture Network that Newbigin founded in the 1980s to assist the British Council of Churches as it sought to reengage a largely unchurched domestic population spawned an American counterpart that brought together an ecumenical coalition of theologians and ministry practitioners who, likewise, embraced the notion that ministry in North America should be approached in the same manner as entry into a foreign mission field.

The resultant theological affirmation that emerged from this conversation is represented by the highly influential volume, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998).⁴¹ Although the North American context did not reflect the thorough secularization experienced in Europe, the *Missional Church* authors recognized that the shift in U.S. culture from modern to postmodern attitudes, values, and ideological assumptions had resulted in a religious pluralism that similarly decenters North American churches from their former positions of institutional privilege and cultural influence. The basic premise of *Missional Church* is that this decentering is a blessing in that the church can now see itself for what it was always meant to be—God's instrument for God's mission. Unlike the chaplaincy role that the church played under Christendom, the present context of religious pluralism calls the church to reclaim its nature as the people of God sent into the world to re-present God's reign. Taking its cues

⁴¹ Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

from the biblical witness and not the world, the church embodies an alternative way of life through its practices of baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, Spirit-filled discernment, and hospitality. *Missional Church* castigates the peculiar culture of denominationalism that emerged as North America's distinct form of Christendom and challenges churches to reshape their models of leadership and organizational structures according to a missional orientation that prioritizes God's mission to the world over the church's institutional maintenance.

In *Evangelism after Christendom* (2007), Bryan Stone agrees with the shift away from chaplaincy to a "missional" orientation, but warns that a theological reconstruction of the practice of evangelism in the context of religious pluralism requires a more robust ecclesiology than is implied by the authors of *Missional Church* and its devotees. Stone explains:

I do not disagree entirely with those theologies of evangelism and mission that urge a shift away from what is disparagingly called "ecclesiocentrism" to a focused instead on *God's* mission in the world, a mission in which the church is an instrument and agent and so exists for the world rather than for itself. Any evangelism divorced from the *missio Dei* can easily degenerate into little more than a form of ecclesiastical narcissism that neglects, among other things, vital matters such as justice, peacemaking, or the well-being of the ecosphere. But if God's calling out of a people is, in fact, the *missio Dei*, then pitting a mission-centered evangelism over against a church-centered evangelism is setting up a false dichotomy.⁴²

In contrast, Stone argues that the church is the necessary social context from within which the practice of evangelism is properly narrated and virtuously practiced because

⁴² Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 189.

the church itself is the embodiment of the gospel to which evangelism bears witness. Newbigin argued for the necessity of the Christian tradition to retain the particularity of the gospel story; Stone extends the argument to include the necessity of the restoration of the particularity of the church as a tradition-formed community:

Christian evangelism requires as a condition of its very possibility the presence in the world, though distinct from the world, of a visible people, a new society, into which persons may be invited and formed... In our time, however, the church has largely lost a sense of Israel-like peoplehood... This neglect of peoplehood may well be the central challenge facing Christian evangelism.⁴³

Stone's central argument is that the practice of evangelism is in a state of disrepair because the church has adopted rival narratives as its own, thus rendering the church incapable of cultivating a form of life—a *habitus*—that is distinctively Christian. Consequently, an evangelism that has been shaped by the rival narratives of Constantinianism and modernity employs alien means and is aimed at ends that are unfaithful to the gospel.

In response, Stone argues that “the most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church – to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.”⁴⁴ Further radicalizing the thesis, Stone argues not that the church behave rightly so as to gain credibility for the task of evangelizing, but rather that the church—as a distinctive, peaceful, Spirit-led alternative

⁴³ Ibid., 194-195.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

social option—is the content of evangelism. The church *is*, in large measure, the salvation that it preaches.⁴⁵ The faithful ecclesial presence of the church becomes, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, evangelistic witness.

Taken together, Newbiggin and Stone contribute to a narrativist confessional approach to evangelism that coheres with the black postmodern ecclesiology formulated in the previous chapter, which understands the black church as a covenant community whose confessional identity and mission are shaped by black Americans' particular experience of God through their encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ. I revise this emphasis on the distinctiveness of black Christian community by balancing it with a non-essentialist postmodern understanding of black identity that accounts for the ambiguous and complex character of the varieties of black American experience. I argue that this recognition of the varieties of black experience within the community helps strengthen the church's collective witness to the gospel by incorporating the unique testimonies of novel or previously excluded/oppressed voices into the church's continual re-narration of the story of God's creative action in the life of black people. I further argue that a genuine commitment to acknowledging differences within the black community requires that the black church reckon with the reality of the cultural shift toward greater religious pluralism in the black community. This reckoning means that the black church can no longer conceive of itself as coterminous or even as the "center" of the black community at-large. However, although a responsible postmodern black ecclesiology must jettison

⁴⁵ Ibid., 188.

this aspect of the black church's historic self-conception, it can still maintain an ethical commitment to pursue justice and well-being for all black people as a fundamental expression of the black church's participation in the *missio Dei*. In other words, while the life of the black church is no longer a central concern of the whole black community, the life of the whole black community is still a central concern of the black church. In this way, the black church need not abandon or abridge its distinctively Christian faith identity in order to fulfill its mission to and on behalf of all black people.

The narrativist confessionalism of Newbigin and Stone provide the theological resources to advance a theology of evangelism that balances the distinctiveness of the black Christian tradition while remaining responsive to postmodern approaches to religious difference. Newbigin's emphasis on the freedom and agency of the Spirit in controlling the improvisational process of contextualization by which fresh expressions of Christian community take shape is particularly affirming of the black Christian tradition, which is itself a product of the mutually critical exchange between the Euro-American Protestant evangelical faith tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries and the African worldviews and cultural practices that persisted within African-American slave communities. However, while this model of mission reflects the origins of the black Christian tradition, any contemporary conception of evangelism as mutually critical exchange between the church and the world cannot be justified simply by appealing to the black church's history and experience. Because of the importance of the Bible in the black church, it is just as important that Newbigin's conception of the dialogical and mutually transformational dynamic of mission is derived from a close reading of the

scriptural record of cross-cultural mission. Not only does Newbigin argue that mutually critical exchange between the church and the world is possible within the biblical logic of mission, but he shows that it is biblically *necessary* for the sake of the church's own growth in faithfulness.

Although Newbigin acknowledges the communal nature of the church's witness to the reign of God, Stone displays a stronger emphasis on the necessity of the cultivation of a distinctive form of life that faithfully embodies the church's confessional difference from the world. Stone's more communal brand of confessionalism is especially welcome given the threat that American individualism poses to black American communal identity and ethical commitment, as discussed in the previous chapter. Stone's communal confessionalism is helpful in affirming the thoroughly practical and relational nature of the claims of the gospel and aligns with black theology's insistence that the gospel is fundamentally social, economic, and political. Black theology has consistently proclaimed that the truth of the gospel is not only a set of beliefs, but a life lived out in faithfulness to the peculiar way of Jesus. In defiance of modernity's tendency to privatize, individualize, and minimize the import of Christian faith, both the black Christian tradition and Stone's communal confessionalism assert the holistic character of the gospel. This is why, as Orlando Costas puts it, the whole of the church's mission has an "evangelistic cutting edge" as the church's faithful discipleship of the holistic gospel of Jesus Christ brings the church into substantive engagement with the world through the ecclesial practices of worship (*leitourgia*), fellowship/communion (*koinonia*), service (*diakonia*), advocacy for justice and peace (*dikaionia*), and Christian education/formation

(*didache*). Christian evangelism requires that these ecclesial practices be in good working order—meaning that they are narrated by the Christian story and faithfully practiced in all their Christ-centered peculiarity.⁴⁶

Although Stone stresses the importance of restoring and preserving the church's tradition-formed difference from the world as a necessary condition of evangelism, he agrees that the “openness to the judgment of the dialogue partner of which Newbigin speaks is especially critical for the post-Christendom practice of evangelism.”⁴⁷ Facilitating this openness is Stone's identification of narrative as the definitive form of the Christian tradition's normative truth. Newbigin refers to the gospel as a story as well. However, his frequent reference to the gospel's “claims” relies on a propositional conception of biblical or creedal truth that I find too static. Though Stone acknowledges that there is a propositional dimension to Christianity's confession, he is more committed in his portrayal of the normativity of the tradition as the story of the people of God. Not only is the medium of story more consistent with the dominance of oral tradition in black church practice, but it conveys the elasticity of the Christian tradition as the Holy Spirit stretches and enlarges the boundaries of the church's confessional identity through evangelistic exchange.

Together, Newbigin and Stone articulate an understanding of the Christian tradition that “takes seriously both the historical relativity of the gospel and its intrinsic

⁴⁶ Costas, *Liberating News*, 136-145.

⁴⁷ Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 161.

claims to comprehensiveness, [that] seeks obediently to bear witness to that gospel but also repentantly to receive correction from others.”⁴⁸ Motivated and governed by its eschatological and doxological biblical logic, a narrativist confessional approach to evangelism trusts God to direct the outcome of the church’s faithful witness to the gospel through mutually critical and transformative exchanges across the boundary lines between church and world and delights in the creative agency that the Holy Spirit exercises through that evangelistic encounter. This theological approach provides an epistemological framework and a biblical model for evangelism that coalesce with the balance between the communal distinctiveness and the adaptability of tradition in my understanding of the identity and mission of the black church in the emerging postmodern cultural context.

**Joyful Noise: Evangelism through Extra-Ecclesial
Communal Witness**

*Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with
gladness: come before his presence with singing.*
Psalm 100:1-2 (KJV)

I began this chapter by defining evangelism as the church’s invitational extension of its witness beyond its own confessional boundaries. I also theorized that in a postmodern cultural context, this invitational extension must take the form of substantive, mutually critical transformative exchanges across the boundary lines that delineate church and world, resulting in the reassessment and revision of where those boundary

⁴⁸ Ibid., 162.

lines are drawn. In defense of this thesis, I appealed to Lesslie Newbigin's defense of the viability of cross-cultural mission in the light of the postmodern commitment to relativism. Newbigin argues that the lived experience of cross-cultural mission is evidence that people from different cultures with different *a priori* intellectual commitments and immersed in opposing philosophical plausibility structures can and do influence one another through meaningful relationship in ways that defy the formal logic of relativism. Newbigin's work also demonstrates that evangelism's purpose and character as mutually critical transformative exchange originates from and is necessitated by the very nature and character of the Christian gospel.

Bryan Stone cautions that "missional" evangelism needs to remember that the *missio Dei* is fundamentally ecclesial and that Christian witness is necessarily a communal practice rooted in the Christian narrative. I agree with Stone that since the Christian faith is ecclesial in nature, the church must maintain the integrity of its communal witness if it is to offer the world a gospel that is truly Christian. However, I also agree with Newbigin that the church must risk the purity of its practices and the solidity of its tradition if it is to enter into the mutually critical transformative encounters with the world that allow the gospel to be faithfully contextualized in new environments and which, conversely, renew the church by enlarging the church's vision of God's presence and activity in the world. Thus, I arrive at a practical theology of evangelism as a thoroughly ecclesial practice whose goal is to extend the church's witness beyond the *ecclesia*.

Affirming both of these theological points of emphasis creates an ideological tension that I argue is best resolved in the practice of ministry. The phenomenon of historically black collegiate gospel choirs in the context of predominantly white university campuses points the way towards an approach to evangelism that reconciles the gospel-driven impulse to extend the church's witness beyond the confessional bounds of the church with the imperative that faithful witness must be truly ecclesial, emanating from the narratives, practices, and virtues of the church community. Again, I invoke Cheryl J. Sanders' account of the significance of HBCGCs:

The cultural resistance of black students to the pressure to assimilate the particular values, practices, and attitudes of the university setting and the social classes it emulates has been a critical determinant of the success and distinctiveness of the gospel choir movement.⁴⁹

HBCGCs were created by black students with the expressed intention of transposing their experience of the black church faith tradition into the university setting. In chapter five, I identified practices that constitute *ecclesia*: worship, discipleship, communion/fellowship, service, justice seeking, and intentional public witness. Although none of the HBCGCs in this study engage in the fullness of the practices that constitute true *ecclesia*, they each work – in various ways and to different degrees – to situate the central activity of singing within its proper context as an ecclesial practice reflecting black people's historic and ongoing experiences with God in Christ. In chapter three, I described how the HBCGCs in the study do not simply engage in the practice of singing black sacred music, but intertwine that practice with other practices that comprise

⁴⁹ Sanders, "Resistance, Rebellion, and Reform," 210.

ecclesial community such as hospitality, prayer, communal care, testimony, fellowship, service, instruction, and even some forms of proclamation.

At the same time, HBCGCs are attractive to non-black and non-Christian members, creating a context for the development of substantive interpersonal exchange between those for whom black Christian faith is native and those for whom it is not, all within the framework of black Christian worship practice. As discussed above, the key to balancing the cultivation of a definitively black Christian communal space alongside an open hospitality that invites and welcomes racial and religious “others” is the practice of non-coercive narrative discipline. That is to say, HBCGCs are most successful at striking this balance when they make intentional and deep engagement with the history and contexts that birthed and continue to nourish the music of black Christian worship a necessary component of participation while at the same time encouraging and empowering members to make their own sense of how that biblical, historical, and cultural story might impact, implicate, or inspire their own lives. Even BU’s Inner Strength, which is officially positioned as a religious organization, has adapted to the environment of religious pluralism by communicating this interpretive freedom to their members. This interpretive freedom is what distinguishes HBCGCs as “extra”-ecclesial communities. I term HBCGCs extra-ecclesial communities of faith practice not simply because they bring elements of ecclesial community out of the physical bounds of the church building and into the university setting, but because they extend ecclesial community beyond the confessional boundaries of the church.

While the exercise of non-coercive narrative discipline provides intellectual and emotional room for racial and religious “others” to feel welcome as members of these extra-ecclesial communities of black Christian faith practice, it can only be practiced once these “others” have already made a decision to join. What makes a student want to join a community that is not “for” them? Why submit oneself to this kind of disciplined engagement in the story and tradition of black Christian people in the first place? Throughout my field research, students cited the attractional power of the music as the impetus for their interest in joining their respective choirs, confirming the insight of Melva Wilson Costen cited in chapter three:

Gospel music has a magnetic power to draw people in. There is an attraction to the musical sounds and rhythms, and the personalized message draws listeners into the story. The vocal and physical delivery of the singers helps you to hear and understand that you still belong to someone despite your status in life. It is the simplicity of the phrases and repetition of words and rhythmical devices. It is the depth of feeling that is invoked with each musical phrase, the memorable lines that one can recall long after the music stops. It is all of these things and more that provides a magnetic appeal of gospel music.⁵⁰

Along with their enjoyment of the music, most students also cited the community of love and friendship that the experience of sharing this music fosters. In order to practice evangelism through the development of extra-ecclesial communities of faith practice, the practice itself has to be attractive and powerful enough to draw people of difference and hold them together in shared experience long enough for them to love each other. Subsequently, the love of the community must be genuine enough to instigate and sustain

⁵⁰ Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 95-96.

meaningful dialogue across the lines of racial and religious difference. Over time these exchanges are used by the Spirit to transform those involved more and more toward a commitment to embody and advance the vision of love, peace, and justice that God has for the world.

Although my study of HBCGCs has pointed me in the direction of this model of evangelism through extra-ecclesial communal witness, I must make clear that it is still largely a work of theological imagination since none of the choirs fully embodies this vision. Tufts' Third Day Gospel Choir engages in elements of worship (singing, prayer, proclamation) and service, but it is constrained by its size and organizational structure from constructing meaningful community. BU's Inner Strength Gospel Choir maintains Christian worship and intentional Christian witness, but its failure to sustain its distinctively black communal identity threatens to erode the bonds of community that are fundamental to the experience of black *ecclesia*. This erosion of black community also endangers the choir's discipleship vehicle, whose success was predicated upon enthusiastic participation and students' willingness to share their lives with one another. Harvard's Kuumba Singers maintains a strong communal focus on black history and culture and its implications for justice/service in the present, but its ambivalence towards an explicitly Christian faith commitment means that its practical function as a context for Christian worship, discipleship, and witness is incidental and dependent on individual interpretive and practical choices.

The purpose of this study is to inform the ongoing practice of black churches. Thus, these observations are not intended as criticisms of HBCGCs, which each have

their own explicit and implicit goals, which do not necessarily conform to my interest in Christian evangelism. Certainly, as with all organizations, these HBCGCs would benefit from critical study of the ways in which they might better fulfill their own mission statements and remain faithful to their distinctive histories. However, such recommendations are beyond the scope of this inquiry. My intention here is to clarify the implications of my findings for the construction of a practical theology of evangelism for black churches. In highlighting the ways in which the HBCGCs fail to faithfully embody black Christian ecclesial community in their respective settings, I mean to demonstrate the risk involved in extending ecclesial practice beyond the physical and confessional bounds of the church. However, the acknowledgement of this risk should not be considered a theological injunction against taking it, only a caution that the risk is real and requires great care in striking the right balance between preserving the authenticity of the church's distinctive communal identity and the necessary openness to adapting the community to the context into which that the ecclesial practice is being extended.

I use the term “joyful noise” to describe the model of evangelism I am proposing. In music theory, “noise” has traditionally been defined as unmusical sound. However, the classification of sound into the categories of “music” and “noise” is a socially conditioned process. As noted ‘noise music’ theorist Paul Hegarty writes: “We should not have the idea that noise is subjective – it is something that happens to the individual...But noise is a judgment, a social one, based on unacceptability, the breaking

of norms and a fear of violence.”⁵¹ From this perspective, noise can be defined simply as sound which does not conform to established norms of musicality. However, because the classification of sound as music versus non-music is a social process, the determination of constitutes noise is a dynamic one. “What is noise now will not necessarily remain so.”⁵² Ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes argues that in the case of black American musical aesthetics, this journey from suppression and dismissal as noise to appreciation and appropriation as groundbreaking music by white mainstream society has assumed a cyclical nature that manifests itself with each sonic innovation in black musical production from the field hollers, spirituals, and blues of the 19th century to the advent of jazz, rhythm ‘n’ blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and hip-hop in the 20th century.⁵³ The entire development of American popular music can be narrated as the story of the dynamic cultural process by which black music as “noise” pushed and pulled at the boundaries of mainstream American musical sensibilities until its status transformed from transgressive *non-music* to progressive *new music*.

This conception of the nature and function of black music as noise in the development of the American popular musical soundscape serves as an apt metaphor for

⁵¹ Paul Hegarty, “Come On, Feel the Noise,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/nov/10/squarepusher-paul-hegarty-noise> (accessed March 3, 2015).

⁵² Paul Hegarty, “A Chronic Condition: Noise and Time,” in *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, eds. Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 17.

⁵³ Cheryl L. Keyes, “The Aesthetic Significance of African American Sound Culture and Its Impact on American Popular Music Style and Industry,” *The World of Music* 45, no. 3 (January 2003): 105-129.

my postmodern theology of evangelism as the church's invitational extension of its communal witness beyond its own confessional boundaries in order to engage in mutually critical and transformative exchanges with others. By insisting that evangelism is a communal, ecclesial witness, this understanding of evangelism affirms that authentic evangelism requires the preservation of a distinctive, counter-cultural Christian community with its own narrative, values, practices, and cultural norms within the panoply of social options in postmodern culture. However, engagement always entails the risk of losing distinctiveness as the church opens itself up to being transformed by the exchange with "others." The result of the exchange may not conform to the exact shape and character of the church as we now know it and may, therefore, be deemed unfaithful to Christian tradition—"noise." The narrative that we tell of the world will have to expand as we take into account the stories of others—stories that reveal to us realities about our world, ourselves, and our God to which we were previously deaf. But, more than being open to this kind of transformation, what distinguishes this model of evangelism is its insistence that the church extend beyond itself to create the conditions necessary for this kind of exchange to take place. The church cannot be content to attend to the faithfulness of its ecclesial practices and hope that the beauty of its holiness will attract others to participate. The church must take the risk of creating transgressive extra-ecclesial communities of faith practice that adapt ecclesial practices to non-ecclesial social spaces and make room for non-Christians to participate without insisting that they adopt the church's own interpretation of the experience.

I am arguing for a model of evangelism that is a dangerous endeavor whose outcome is not assured. If the church is not careful, it may conform too much to the likeness of the world thereby losing its distinctiveness and having nothing to offer the world. In this way, extra-ecclesial communities of faith practice may prove to be insufficiently Christian to provide a communal context for an authentic encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that non-coercive narrative discipline will ever result in the proper discipleship of those who have been invited into the extra-ecclesial community. Melva Wilson Costen warns as much with respect to the evangelistic efficacy of gospel music:

While affirming that music which emanates from the soul of African-American people, expressing their current situation or *Sitz im Leben*, one must also consider the counter effects of having music released to communities outside of its existential situation of origin. This marvelous creation and concept of good news and soulful songs continues to have a powerful influence on young and restless seekers as they are driven to high moments and encounters with the Almighty. There are some who move from these encounters to acts of ministry – seeking justice, loving kindly, and walking humbly. And then there are those who sing and move to the slow or driving rhythms of gospel songs who have no idea of their initial intent as good news.⁵⁴

Yet, as this quote from Costen acknowledges, the risk of extra-ecclesial communal faith practice may also result in genuine encounters with God that move people to new or greater awareness of God's purpose and greater alignment with God's mission. Thus, the transgressive "noise" of the interpretive freedom of "others" may be transformed into the progressive "new" music of nascent faith commitment and practice as they live more

⁵⁴ Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth: the Music of African American Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 74.

and more into the Christian narrative and the way of Jesus, thereby joining the ecclesial community.

The new or renewed Christian faith that emerges from the mutually critical exchange between the church and the world through the experience of extra-ecclesial faith practice may not appear to be authentic Christian faith from the perspective of some within the church. It may still be considered noise in contrast to what some may consider to be the certain sound of their own interpretation and practice of Christian faith. Instead of drawing others into an already recognizable form of Christianity, the extra-ecclesial community may end up treading new ground that is common only to those who become its members. However, if that common ground is found not through the church's abdication of its identity, but rather through its identification of the Spirit at work in the other, then the mutually critical exchange between them does not mean the loss of the church's gospel integrity. As discussed above, the biblical record presents many examples where the identification of the Spirit at work outside of the church led to the church's own correction and call to greater faithfulness. The resultant experience of Christian community may still be considered "noise" because it is unfamiliar, but not necessarily unfaithful. In this instance, just as in music, this transgressive "noise" can become accepted as the progressive "new," not by being incorporated into existing ecclesial community, but as the Spirit enlarges the church's vision as to what constitutes faithful ecclesial community.

Evangelism as the church's extension of its witness beyond its confessional borders through extra-ecclesial communities of faith is a noisy practice, indeed. But it is

a *joyful* noise. It is noise insofar as it transgresses established norms of Christian thought and practice for the sake of invitation, dialogue, and mutually critical transformation. However, even though it is a transgressive practice, it is guided by purpose. To borrow Newbigin's refrain once more, evangelism is the product of the "explosion of joy" of encountering the love of God in Christ. As such, the faithfulness of evangelistic practice is identified primarily by its conformity with God's loving extension of God's self through the incarnation. In Christ, the unsurpassable love of God extended beyond divine presence to be made known in a form that was identifiable and accessible by human beings. God's incarnational presence is experienced by human beings in ambiguous and complex ways because of the limits of human finitude, requiring our constant redemption, healing, revision, salvation. Just as the joy of experiencing God's love sustains the church through its own process of being conformed to God's purpose, so too does the joy of God's love sustain the church's transgressive, risky, and unpredictable evangelistic encounter with the world. The joy of God's love is what propels the church to extend beyond itself through extra-ecclesial communal faith practice. The joy of God's love is what draws others to participate in that communal faith practice. The joy of God's love is what compels the church to initiate mutually critical and transformative relationships across the boundary line of church and world and the joy of God's love is what makes those relationships possible. Ultimately, the practice of evangelism in this postmodern moment must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide the joyful noise that is mutually critical transformative exchange. All that is left for the church is obedience. In the words of James Cone:

Every theology ought to move beyond its particularity to the concrete experience of others...In our efforts to accent our particularities, we must be careful not to limit God to them or to remain enclosed in them ourselves... We must, then, bear witness to God's creation of a new humanity by moving beyond ourselves to our neighbors for the building of community defined by love, justice, and peace.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 173-174.

APPENDIX A: Demographic Information Survey

1. Gender: Female_____ Male:_____ Other: _____
2. Age: _____
3. School: _____ Class Year: _____ Concentration/Major: _____
4. Racial/Ethnic Designation (circle all that apply):
 - Black or African American (Not Hispanic or Latino)
 - White (Not Hispanic or Latino)
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Asian
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - Two or More Races: _____
5. Religious Affiliation (circle all that apply; specify denomination/branch/sect where appropriate):

African Traditional: _____	Humanist: _____
Agnostic: _____	Jewish: _____
Atheist: _____	Muslim: _____
Buddhist: _____	Pagan/Earth: _____
Christian: _____	Sikh: _____
Confucian: _____	Taoist: _____
Deist: _____	Other: _____
Hindu: _____	None: _____

APPENDIX B: Demographic Survey Informed Consent Form

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Joyful Noise – A practical theological study of the ecclesiological and evangelical significance of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white university campuses in the greater Boston area.

Principal Investigator: Theodore N. Hickman-Maynard
Ph.D. Candidate in Practical Theology
Boston University School of Theology
tmaynard@bu.edu; 617-610-8580

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Bryan P. Stone
Boston University School of Theology
bpstone@bu.edu; 617-353-3050

Study Background

This study will contribute to the completion of a doctoral dissertation, which will be submitted by Teddy Hickman-Maynard in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Practical Theology at the Boston University School of Theology.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the communal life of collegiate gospel choirs in all of their depth and complexity, and to understand the ways in which individual members make sense of their participation in these choirs. Specifically, this study will investigate how these choirs, which emerged out of the black Christian worship tradition, have adapted to and continue to thrive within a non-church context with a religiously and racial-ethnically diverse population. Ultimately, this study will bring these insights to bear on the ongoing theological conversation regarding the current and future state of the black Christian tradition in the 21st century U.S. cultural context.

What is Being Asked of You?

Over the course of the semester, the principal investigator will be observing the group activities of your choir including rehearsals, meetings, concerts, and other formal and informal social gatherings affiliated with the choir. In order to document the distribution of descriptive characteristics of the choir's membership—such as age, class year, academic concentration/major, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and place/nation of origin—all choir members are being asked to complete an anonymous demographic information survey.

Risks and Discomforts

Participation in the survey presents minimal risk to the research subjects. There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic risks beyond those that the participants would encounter in daily life or in the practice of the choir's routine activities.

However, given the specific nature of the information that you will be providing, it is possible that your identity could be deduced from the demographic information survey.

Benefits

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this survey. However, the director and the student leadership board will obtain a summary of findings which will include a table of the demographic data. This summary may prove useful to the director and the student leadership board as they plan recruitment, initiation, and developmental initiatives for the choir in the future.

Costs/Payments

There are no known costs to you for participating in this research study except for your time. You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality

The demographic information survey does not ask for any personal identifying information. However, as mentioned above, there is a slight chance that you may be identified by your demographic information alone. To help protect your confidentiality, all demographic information surveys will be stored in a locked file cabinet when not being used for research. Upon the completion of the study and the submission of the final dissertation, the original surveys will be destroyed and the information obtained from them will only persist as aggregate data.

You should be aware that information from this study and any study records may be reviewed and photocopied by the academic institution and by regulators responsible for research oversight such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this survey is voluntary. If you do not wish to complete the survey, simply leave the form blank and return it when the forms are collected. The forms will be collected by volunteers from the choir so as to prevent the principal investigator from

determining which choir members complete the survey and which members do not. This procedure will help to ensure that you will not experience undue pressure from the principal investigator to participate, nor any penalty if you choose not to participate.

Contacts

If you have questions regarding this research or if you have a research related injury, either now or at any time in the future, please contact the principal investigator, Teddy Hickman-Maynard, at 617-610-8580 or tmaynard@bu.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Bryan P. Stone, at 617-353-3050 or bpstone@bu.edu.

You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Boston University Charles River Campus Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.

Agreement to Participate

By completing the attached demographic information survey you are indicating that you have read this consent form or that it has been read to you. You are also indicating that you voluntarily agree to participate in the survey. Because the survey is anonymous, your signature is not required on this form. You may keep this consent form for your reference. Thank you.

APPENDIX C: Individual Interview Interest Form

INTERVIEW INTEREST FORM

Title of Project: Joyful Noise – A practical theological study of the ecclesiological and evangelical significance of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white university campuses in the greater Boston area.

Principal Investigator: Theodore N. Hickman-Maynard
Ph.D. Candidate in Practical Theology
Boston University School of Theology
tmaynard@bu.edu; 617-610-8580

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Bryan P. Stone
Boston University School of Theology
bpstone@bu.edu; 617-353-3050

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the communal life of collegiate gospel choirs in all of their depth and complexity, and to understand the ways in which individual members make sense of their participation in these choirs. Specifically, this study will investigate how these choirs, which emerged out of the black Christian worship tradition, have adapted to and continue to thrive within a non-church context with a religiously and racial-ethnically diverse population. Ultimately, this study will bring these insights to bear on the ongoing theological conversation regarding the current and future state of the black Christian tradition in the 21st century North American cultural context.

Request for Participation

I am in need of volunteers who are willing to participate in an individual interview during which you will be asked questions about your participation in the choir and how you make sense of your experience. By providing your information below, you are agreeing to be contacted by me to schedule an appointment to conduct the interview. Prior to the appointment, you will receive a detailed “informed consent form” that provides important information regarding your rights as a research subject as well as the steps that will be taken to protect your privacy. If after reading the informed consent form you determine that you do not want to be interviewed, the appointment will be cancelled without question and with no penalty to you. If you decide to proceed with the interview then you will be asked to sign two hard copies of the informed consent form prior to the conduct of the interview. You will retain one copy for your records, while the second copy will be secured in a locked file cabinet accessible to the principle investigator and the faculty advisor alone.

If you are willing to participate in an individual interview, please provide the following information (*Undergraduate students only please*):

First name only: _____

E-mail: _____ Cell #: _____

APPENDIX D: Informed Consent for Key Informants

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Joyful Noise – A practical theological study of the ecclesiological and evangelical significance of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white university campuses in the greater Boston area.

Principal Investigator: Theodore N. Hickman-Maynard
Ph.D. Candidate in Practical Theology
Boston University School of Theology
tmaynard@bu.edu; 617-610-8580

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Bryan P. Stone
Boston University School of Theology
bpstone@bu.edu; 617-353-3050

Study Background

This study will contribute to the completion of a doctoral dissertation, which will be submitted by Teddy Hickman-Maynard in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Practical Theology at the Boston University School of Theology.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a source of valuable knowledge regarding one of the three collegiate gospel choirs that are the focus of the research.

You will be one of nine faculty/staff asked to serve as “key informants” for this research study. Each key informant interview will last for one hour. The entire field research is expected to last through May 31, 2012.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the communal life of collegiate gospel choirs in all of their depth and complexity, and to understand the ways in which individual members make sense of their participation in these choirs. Specifically, this study will investigate how these choirs, which emerged out of the black Christian worship tradition, have adapted to and continue to thrive within a non-church context with a religiously and racial-ethnically diverse population. Ultimately, this study will bring these insights to bear on the ongoing theological conversation regarding the current and future state of the black Christian tradition in the 21st century North American cultural context.

What Will Happen in this Research Study?

Over the course of the study, the principal investigator will be observing the group activities of all three choirs including rehearsals, meetings, concerts, and other formal and informal social gatherings affiliated with the choirs. In order to document the distribution of descriptive characteristics of the choirs' memberships—such as age, class year, academic interest/major, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and place/nation of origin—the study employs an anonymous demographic information survey. An interest form will be distributed asking that students who are willing to participate in an individual interview provide their first names and contact information. The principle investigator will select between fifteen student members from each choir to interview in-depth about their experience in their respective choir.

To help situate the experience of the current members into a broader historical and institutional context, the principle investigator will also interview the directors of each choir as well as two other “key informants” for each choir. These additional key informants will be chosen from among university faculty or staff, whom the directors indicate possess valuable information regarding the history and development of each choir. You have been contacted by the principle investigator because you have been identified as a potential key informant.

The interview will take place at a mutually agreed-upon location. At the time of your interview, the principal investigator will provide you with two paper copies of this informed consent form. You will have an opportunity to ask any questions that you may have before deciding to proceed with the interview. You will indicate your willingness to commence the interview by signing both copies of the informed consent form. The principal investigator will then sign both copies of the form. You will be given one of the copies to keep for your records and the principal investigator will take the second copy for his records. The interview will then begin.

All interviews will be captured via a digital recording device in order to ensure that your statements are accurately accounted for. Once the recording device has been turned on, the principal investigator will ask you a series of questions regarding the history, organizational structure, and current role of the gospel choir on your campus. The interview will last one hour.

Following the interview, the principal investigator will personally transcribe the interview for later reference and analysis. Although the principal investigator will continue to observe the choir for the duration of the semester, you are under no obligation to provide any more information than what you provide during your interview.

Risks and Discomforts

Participation in the study presents minimal risk to the research subjects. There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic risks beyond those that the participants would encounter in daily life. However, there may be unforeseen risks to the study. If new risks are identified the principal investigator will update you with any new information that might affect your health, welfare, or decision to stay in the study.

Benefits

You will receive no personal benefit from participating in this study. However, directors and the student leadership boards will obtain a summary of findings outlining the demographic data collected as well as aggregated data from the individual interviews. These summary reports may prove useful to directors and student leadership boards as they plan recruitment, initiation, and developmental initiatives for the choirs.

Costs/Payments

There are no known costs to you for participating in this research study except for your time. You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality

Since the choirs and universities will be referenced by name, the identity of key informants will be easily identifiable. Because the purpose of a key informant interview is to obtain background information about the choir, it may not be necessary to directly quote your contributions in the final dissertation. However, if the principal investigator deems it helpful to quote or refer to one of your responses directly, then your identity will be disclosed to provide the reader with the proper context for the statements. Given that you will not remain anonymous, please give thoughtful consideration to the implications of your participation in this study.

Information from this study and study records may be reviewed and photocopied by the academic institution and by regulators responsible for research oversight such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research is voluntary. You have a right to refuse to take part in this study. If you decide to be in this study you can refuse to answer any question if you wish. You do not have to provide any reason for your refusal to answer any question. If you decide to be in this study and then change your mind, you can withdraw from the

research. Refusal to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether or not you wish to continue to take part in the research, you will be told about them as soon as possible. The investigator may decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent. This might happen if he decides that staying in the study will be bad for you, or if he or his advisor decides to stop the study.

Contacts

If you have questions regarding this research or if you have a research related injury, either now or at any time in the future, please contact the principal investigator, Teddy Hickman-Maynard, at 617-610-8580 or tmaynard@bu.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Bryan P. Stone, at 617-353-3050 or bpstone@bu.edu. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Boston University Charles River Campus Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.

Agreement to Participate

By signing this consent form you are indicating that you have read this consent form or it has been read to you. You are also indicating that you have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing the consent form you are indicating that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Printed Name of Principal Investigator

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Permission to Audio Record

By signing below, you agree to allow the principal investigator to make an audio recording of this interview.

Signature of Subject

Date

Permission to Quote

By signing below, you are granting the principal investigator permission to quote you by name in the final study and any subsequent publication of the findings of the research.

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX E: Informed Consent for Students

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Joyful Noise – A practical theological study of the ecclesiological and evangelical significance of historically black collegiate gospel choirs on predominantly white university campuses in the greater Boston area.

Principal Investigator: Theodore N. Hickman-Maynard
Ph.D. Candidate in Practical Theology
Boston University School of Theology
tmaynard@bu.edu; 617-610-8580

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Bryan P. Stone
Boston University School of Theology
bpstone@bu.edu; 617-353-3050

Study Background

This study will contribute to the completion of a doctoral dissertation, which will be submitted by Teddy Hickman-Maynard in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Practical Theology at the Boston University School of Theology.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate member of one of the three collegiate gospel choirs that are the focus of the research.

You will be one of approximately forty-five research subjects asked to participate in the student interview portion of the research. Each individual interview will last two hours. The research also entails observation of the choirs' group activities. All field research is expected to last through May 31, 2011.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the communal life of collegiate gospel choirs in all of their depth and complexity, and to understand the ways in which individual members make sense of their participation in these choirs. Specifically, this study will investigate how these choirs, which emerged out of the black Christian worship tradition, have adapted to and continue to thrive within a non-church context with a religiously and racial-ethnically diverse population. Ultimately, this study will bring these insights to bear on the ongoing theological conversation regarding the current and future state of the black Christian tradition in the 21st century North American cultural context.

What Will Happen in this Research Study?

Over the course of the semester, the principal investigator will be observing the group activities of all three choirs including rehearsals, meetings, concerts, and other formal and informal social gatherings affiliated with the choirs. In order to document the distribution of descriptive characteristics of the choirs' memberships—such as age, class year, academic interest/major, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and place/nation of origin—the study employed an anonymous demographic information survey. At that time, an interest form was distributed asking that members who are willing to participate in an individual interview provide their first names and contact information. You have been contacted by the principal investigator because you indicated your willingness to participate in an individual interview.

The interview will take place at a mutually agreed-upon location on your university campus. When you arrive for your interview, the principal investigator will provide you with two paper copies of this informed consent form. You will have an opportunity to ask any questions that you may have before deciding to proceed with the interview. You will indicate your willingness to commence the interview by signing both copies of the informed consent form. The principal investigator will then sign both copies of the form. You will be given one of the copies to keep for your records and the principal investigator will take the second copy for his records. The interview will then begin.

All interviews will be captured via a digital recording device in order to ensure that your statements are accurately accounted for. Once the recording device has been turned on, the principal investigator will ask you a series of open-ended questions about your experience as a member the choir. The interview will last for two hours.

Following the interview, the principal investigator will personally transcribe the interview for later reference and analysis. Although the principal investigator will continue to observe the choir for the duration of the semester, you are under no obligation to provide any more information than what you provided during your interview.

Risks and Discomforts

Participation in the study presents minimal risk to the research subjects. There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic risks beyond those that the participants would encounter in daily life or in the practice of the choirs' routine activities. However, there may be unforeseen risks to the study. If new risks are identified the principal investigator will update you in a timely way about any new information that might affect your health, welfare, or decision to stay in the study.

Benefits

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study. However, the director and the student leadership board will obtain a summary of findings outlining the demographic data collected as well as aggregated data from the individual interviews. These summary reports may prove useful to the director and student leadership board as they plan recruitment, initiation, and developmental initiatives for the choir.

Costs/Payments

There are no known costs to you for participating in this research study except for your time. You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality

No data collected during the research will be linked to personal identifying information at any time. To help protect your anonymity, you will not be referred to by name during the conduct of the interview. Additionally, the interest form containing your first name and contact information will be destroyed immediately upon the completion of the interview.

The information you provide during the interview may be used in publications or presentations. Any direct quotation of your statements will be attributed to a fictitious name. However, the principal investigator cannot guarantee complete anonymity because of the possibility that someone may deduce your identity from the content of your statements.

Information from this study and study records may be reviewed and photocopied by the academic institution and by regulators responsible for research oversight such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research is voluntary. You have a right to refuse to take part in this study. If you decide to be in this study you can refuse to answer any question if you wish. You do not have to provide any reason for your refusal to answer any question. If you decide to be in this study and then change your mind, you can withdraw from the research. Refusal to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether or not you wish to continue to take part in the research, you will be told about them as soon as possible. The principal investigator may decide to stop your participation in the study without your

consent. This might happen if he decides that staying in the study will be bad for you, or if he or his advisor decides to stop the study.

Contacts

If you have questions regarding this research or if you have a research related injury, either now or at any time in the future, please contact the principal investigator, Teddy Hickman-Maynard, at 617-610-8580 or tmaynard@bu.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Bryan P. Stone, at 617-353-3050 or bpstone@bu.edu.

You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Boston University Charles River Campus Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.

Agreement to Participate

By signing this consent form you are indicating that you have read this consent form or that it has been read to you. You are also indicating that you have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing the consent form you are indicating that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Printed Name of Principal Investigator

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Permission to Audio Record

By signing below, you agree to allow the principal investigator to make an audio recording of this interview.

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX F: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. Please state your name, title, and relationship to Inner Strength/Kuumba/Third Day.
2. To your knowledge, what is the operational structure of the choir? To whom is it accountable? How is the choir supported financially?
3. When was the choir founded? What were the circumstances that led to its founding?
4. How was the choir initially received by the campus community at-large?
5. How has the choir developed since that time? What moments/years would you identify as the major milestones or turning points in the choir's history?
6. What role does the choir currently play in the life of the campus community at-large?
7. What kinds of students does the choir currently attract? Is this a departure from the original demographic that populated the choir? If so, what do you think accounts for that change?
8. If you were describing the choir to a prospective student, what would you say?

Additional questions for the choir directors:

9. How do you select the songs that the choir sings? What role do students play in the process?
10. Do students teach or direct songs?
11. Do you see the choir as a faith community? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

APPENDIX G: Student Interview Guide

1. First of all, I'd like to get to know a little more about you. Where did you grow up? Tell me about your family? Who were the people, what were the experiences, and where were the contexts that most influenced the person you consider yourself to be today?
2. What brought you to Harvard/BU/Tufts? Why did you choose to come here? What is your major/concentration? Have you given any thought to what you want to do when you graduate?
3. How did you become a member of Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day? When did you first hear about it, and from whom? Why did you join? How long have you been a member?
4. Tell me about Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day. If I knew nothing about the choir, how would you describe it to me? What do you all do? What are you about? How do you go about accomplishing those goals? How is the organization structured? Does the choir have an official "mission statement"? If so, do you know it? Does the choir have an unofficial mission statement – some catch phrase or sentiment that a majority of the members would agree on as being central to the choir's identity?
5. Describe your level of involvement? Are you on any of the committees? Why or why not? Do you attend any of the optional/auxiliary components of the choir? Why or why not?
6. What do you personally enjoy about participating in Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day? If you had the ability and authority to change anything about the choir that you wanted, what would you change? Of those things you mentioned, where would you place each of them on a continuum from (1) being "not a major problem, but I would personally enjoy the change" to (10) being "this is a major problem that detracts from my enjoyment of my participation in the choir"?
7. Can you remember your first rehearsal/meeting/encounter with Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day? What did it feel like? Has your experience of choir changed since that first day through now? If so, can you describe how it has changed? What has been the most important aspect of your participation in Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day?
8. Do you spend a lot of time with Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day members outside of choir activities? If not, explain why? If so, can you describe the nature of your activities?

9. Can you give a rough estimate of what percentage of your friends is made up by fellow choir members versus non-choir members? Do you experience any conflict between your choir friends and your non-choir friends? If so, how do you negotiate that tension?

10. Assuming a continuum of from (1) being “homogenous” to (10) being “very diverse,” where would you place your choir’s membership? What criteria came to your mind when you gave the membership the rating that you gave it? What are some other possible characteristics that you could have used to describe the relative homogeneity or diversity of the membership? Why do you think you immediately thought of the first characteristic versus these other possibilities? Which of these characteristics would you consider most important in defining or describing the choir’s membership? Why?

11. How would you describe the nature of the relationships between choir members? What words would you use? Is there ever any tension within the choir? If so, can you describe the nature of the tension? How significant would you say the tension is? In other words, are these intra-choir conflicts a major part of the experience, or would you consider them aberrations from the usual nature of the interactions among choir members?

12. Let’s talk about the music. How would you describe the music that you sing? In general, do you like the songs that the choir sings? What are some of your favorite songs, and why? What are some of your least favorite songs, and why? Are there songs that you would love for the choir to sing that you know would never be approved for performance? Who would make that decision to exclude those songs, and why do you think they would exclude them? Were there ever any songs that you felt uncomfortable singing? If so, what made you uncomfortable? Would you say that for the most part you “believe” in the songs that you sing? And if so, what does it mean to “believe” in the songs that you sing?

13. Would you use any of the following descriptions for yourself: religious; spiritual; a person of faith? If any of these descriptors apply to you, please elaborate about what it means for you? How do you live out your faith/spirituality/religion? How important is it to you? Is it a big part of your life, a small part, or somewhere in between? Do you belong to a religious/spiritual/faith community? If so, please tell me about your experience in that community. Has your experience and/or practice of religion/spirituality/faith been different in college than it was when you were in high school? If so, in what ways is it different? Do you participate in any faith/religious/spiritual communities on campus?

14. Would you consider your participation in Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day a part of your religious/spiritual/faith expression? Would you describe the choir as a context within which you experience faith/spiritual/religious development? Has your

- participation in Kuumba/Inner Strength/Third Day changed the way you express or live out your faith/spirituality/religion? If so, describe the nature of these changes?
15. Do you consider the choir to be a religious/spiritual/faith community? If so, can you describe what experiences/attributes/activities contribute to the choir functioning in that capacity? If not, what distinguishes the choir from what you would consider a faith community? What makes it different than church/synagogue/mosque/temple/etc.? Do you ever wish that the choir could be more like church/synagogue/mosque/temple/etc.? If so, in what ways? Do you ever wish that church/synagogue/mosque/temple/etc. were more like the choir? What could church/synagogue/mosque/temple/etc. learn from the choir?
 16. Do you think that your experience of the choir as a faith/religious/spiritual community is similar or different from that of others in the choir? Are there members in the choir who practice a different faith than you? Have you noticed any conflict or tension with respect to diversity of faith/religious/spiritual perspectives and/or commitments within the choir? If so, what are some examples of the ways in which that tension/conflict manifests itself? Is this tension/conflict a major impediment to community development with the choir, or is it something that is typically worked through or reconciled in some way? Would you describe the religious/faith/spiritual diversity within the choir as a good thing or is it problematic? Is it both?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, William J. *The Logic of Evangelism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.
- Amoah, Elizabeth and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. "The Christ for African Women." *International Christian Digest* 2, no. 8 (October 1988).
- Anderson, Victor. *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- _____. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Andrews, Dale P. "Black Preaching Praxis." In *Black Church Studies: An Introduction*, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Carol B. Duncan, Stephen G. Ray, Jr., and Nancy Lynne Westfield. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- _____. *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Ashby, Jr., Homer. *Our Home is Over Jordan: A Black Pastoral Theology*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003.
- Astin, Alexander W., Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Bielo, James S. *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Browning, Don S. *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Brunner, Emil. *Dogmatics. vol. 3, The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and Consummation*, translated by David Cairns. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Carruthers, Iva E., Frederick D. Haynes, III, and Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., eds. *Blow the Trumpet in Zion: Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

- Chilcote, Paul W. and Lacey C. Warner. *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.
- Cleage, Albert. *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*. New York: William Morrow, 1972.
- _____. *The Black Messiah*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
- Cone, James H. "Evangelization and Politics: A Black Perspective." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.
- _____. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.
- _____. *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986.
- Costas, Orlando E. *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. *African American Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- _____. *In Spirit and in Truth: the Music of African American Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Dawson, Jr., DeCosta A. "African-American gospel choirs and student attitudes at seven selected college and university campuses" Ed.D. diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey – New Brunswick, 1986.
- Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. "God Is as Christ Does: Toward a Womanist Christology." *Journal of Religious Thought* 46, no. 1 (Summer – Fall 1989)
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004.
- Evans, James H. "African-American Christianity and the Postmodern Condition." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no 2 (Sum 1990): 207-222.
- _____. *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

- Farley, Edward. *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1996.
- Floyd-Thomas, Stacey, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Carol B. Duncan, Stephen G. Ray, Jr., and Nancy Lynne Westfield. *Black Church Studies: An Introduction*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Frederick, Marla F. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Gibbs, Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993
- Grant, Jacquelyn. "Black Theology and the Black Woman." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by Gayroud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.
- _____. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Guder, Darrel L. ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- Hegarty, Paul. "A Chronic Condition: Noise and Time." *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, eds. Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012.
- _____. "Come On, Feel the Noise." *The Guardian*, November 11, 2008.
<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/nov/10/squarepusher-paul-hegarty-noise>
 (accessed March 3, 2015).
- Hilliard, Jr, Donald. *Church Growth from an African American Perspective*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006.
- Hollinghurst, Steve. *Mission-Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2010.
- Hopkins, Dwight N. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.
- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.

- Jones, Louis R. *Evangelism in the African American Community: An Evangelism Tool for Today's Church*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2003.
- Jones, Tony. *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- June, Lee N. and Matthew Parker, eds. *Evangelism and Discipleship in African-American Churches*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. "The Aesthetic Significance of African American Sound Culture and Its Impact on American Popular Music Style and Industry." *The World of Music* 45, no. 3 (January 2003).
- Kimball, Dan. *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.
- Miller, James F. *Go Grow Your Church!: Spiritual Leadership for African American Congregations*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Mitchell, Henry H. *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- _____. *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- _____. "Towards a Black Evangelism." *Journal of Religious Thought* 35, no 1 (Spring-Summer 1978): 55-67.
- Mitchem, Stephanie Y. *Introducing Womanist Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.
- Parker, Evelyn L. *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990.
- Powell, William Clayton. "Performance and literature of African American gospel music as observed in gospel choirs of universities and four-year colleges in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia." Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 1993.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

- _____. "The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism: The Meaning of Slavery." *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Reddie, Anthony. *Working Against the Grain: Re-imagining Black Theology in the 21st Century*. London: Equinox Pub., 2008.
- Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- Sablo, Kahan. "Lift every voice and sing: A gospel choir participation experience and the persistence of African American students at a predominantly white university." Ed.D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2008.
- Sanders, Cheryl J. "Resistance, Rebellion, and Reform: The Collegiate Gospel Choir Movement in the United States." *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 27, no. 1-2 (Fall-Spr 1999-2000): 199-211.
- Smith, Christian, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Smith, Christian and Melissa Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Smith, Yolanda. *"I Want to be Ready!" Teaching Christian Education in the African American Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Stallings, James O. *Telling the Story: Evangelism in Black Churches*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988.
- Stewart, III, Carlyle Fielding. *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles for Prophetic Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- _____. *Growing the African American Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- _____. *The Empowerment Church: Speaking a New Language for Church Growth*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Stone, Bryan P. *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007.
- Townes, Emilie. *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Walker, Jr., Theodore. *Motherhood Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Newoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- West, Cornel. *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. 1: Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 98.
- _____. *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. 2: Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race and Power in America*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993.
- _____. *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988.
- Welchel, Jr., L.H. *The History & Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011.
- White, Heath. *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.
- Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.
- _____. "Surrogacy and Atonement in Black Women's Experience." unpublished paper.
- Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972.

CURRICULUM VITAE

THEODORE N. HICKMAN-MAYNARD
Boston University School of Theology
tmaynard@bu.edu ♦ (617) 610-8580

EDUCATION

Boston University School of Theology ♦ Boston, MA 2005 – 2015
Ph.D. in Practical Theology (Concentration: Evangelism)

Examination Fields: Practical Theology, Evangelism & Mission, Ecclesiology, Youth Culture & Ministry, Black Liberation & Womanist Theologies, Wesleyan Theology

Dissertation: *Joyful Noise: The Ecclesiological and Evangelistic Significance of Racial Diversity and Religious Pluralism in the Experiences of Historically Black Collegiate Gospel Choirs on Three Majority-White University Campuses in Greater Boston*

Boston University School of Theology ♦ Boston, MA 2000 – 2003
Master of Divinity

Harvard University ♦ Cambridge, MA 1996 – 2000
Bachelor of Arts (Concentration: Afro-American Studies)

TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Boston University School of Theology ♦ Boston, MA 2006 – 2008
Teaching Assistant (Dr. Bryan Stone)
Evangelism and Contemporary Cultures
The Gospel and Popular Culture
Faith and Film
John Wesley's Theology Today
Doctoral Proseminar in Practical Theology
Doctoral Proseminar in Ecclesiology

Teaching Assistant (Dr. Bruce Fraser & Dr. Dale Andrews) Fall 2008
Qualitative Research Methods

Research Assistant (Dr. Dale Andrews) Summer 2007
Black Preaching & Homiletic Theory

African Methodist Episcopal Church ♦ Boston, MA 2003 – 2012
Instructor, New England Annual Conference Ministerial Institute
A.M.E. Liturgy
A.M.E. Doctrine
Theology II: Survey of Black & Womanist Theologies
Preaching II: Issues in Contemporary Homiletics

PROFESSIONAL & MINISTERIAL EXPERIENCE

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church ♦ Bridgeport, CT Co-Pastor	2012 – Present
Boston University Residence Life ♦ Boston, MA Residence Hall Director Senior Resident (Graduate) Assistant	2008 – 2012 2007 – 2008
Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church ♦ Lynn, MA Associate Minister for Worship & Ministry to Men	2007 – 2012
People’s African Methodist Episcopal Church ♦ Chelsea, MA Pastor	2005 – 2006
Charles Street A.M.E. Roxbury Renaissance Center ♦ Roxbury, MA Interim Director of Programs	2004 – 2005
Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church ♦ Roxbury, MA Pastoral Resident Associate Minister for Youth Assistant Minister for Youth	2003 – 2005 2000 – 2003 1997 – 2000

PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

- Lecture, Plenary Session, New England Annual Conference Ministerial Institute, African Methodist Episcopal Church (December 2011)
Title: *“Tell the Story!” Narrative Preaching Function, Forms, and Structures*
- Co-Presenter, NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) Region I Conference, Manchester, NH (November 2010)
Title: *Cairns of Cognition and Competency Development: Reaching the Next Ridge in Assessing Student Leader Training*
- Keynote Speaker, The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College 40th Anniversary Closing Celebration, Harvard University (April 2010)
Title: *“May We Forever Stand”: The Kuumba Singers as Black Church Family*
- Panelist, Senior Year Leadership Series, Boston College High School (April 2010)
Panel Topic: *College Life and the Pursuit of Purpose*
- Presenter, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Joint Session: Black Theology Group, Men’s Studies in Religion Group, and Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Group, Chicago, IL (November 2008)
Paper Title: *Abused by Hip Hop: A Practical Theological Reflection on Gender Identities Among Hip Hop Generations*

PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS (continued)

- Keynote Speaker, Boston University Residence Life Winter Training (January 2008)
 Title: *Learning to Learn, Learning to Live, Learning to Love: Discovering the High Calling of Higher Education*
- Speaker, New England Annual Conference, African Methodist Episcopal Church (April 2005)
 Title: *Diamonds Deserved: Lauryn Hill's "Manifest" as Postmodern Prophetic Utterance*
- Panelist, Lilly Endowment 2005 Forum, Indianapolis, IN (January 2005)
 Panel Topic: *The Transition-Into-Ministry Experience and Its Implications for the Future of Field Education*
- Lecture, Plenary Session, New England Annual Conference Ministerial Institute, African Methodist Episcopal Church (April 2004)
 Title: *Homosexuality and the Black Church: Pushing Past the Status Quo*
- Speaker, Easter Season Hall Assembly, The Roxbury Latin School (February 2002)
 Title: *Easter Anamnesis: Re-Membering Real Love in the Making of Young Men*
- Co-Presenter, Inaugural "Groundation" Conference, National Association for the Empowerment of African People (NAEAP), Macoya, Trinidad & Tobago (October 1998)
 Title: *Songs We Can't Sing: The Social Construction of Racial Identity Among Black Youth in the African Diaspora*

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

The Louisville Institute Dissertation Fellowship	2011 – 2012
Boston University School of Theology	
Practical Theology Fellowship	2005 – 2008
Massachusetts Bible Society Award	2003
William D. Studley Merit Scholarship	2001 – 2003
Callendar Merit Scholarship	2001 – 2003
Mary McLeod Bethune Scholarship	2000 – 2003

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Academy of Religion	2006 – Present
Association of Practical Theology	2006 – Present
NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education	2008 – 2012

MINISTERIAL ORDERS

African Methodist Episcopal Church	
Itinerant Elder, New England Annual Conference	2003
Itinerant Deacon, New England Annual Conference	2001
Licensed Preacher, Boston-Hartford District	1997