

BEULAH HEIGHTS UNIVERSITY

How Can the African American Church Evangelize and Maintain Millennials

A Research Proposal

Dr. Abrams

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By

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Introduction

“The future of the African American church is the millennial generation, young adults 18 to 29 years of age. Millennials, also known as Generation Y are the largest growing population and are reported the least religious and unaffiliated with any religious institution.”¹ Although, in survey, millennials have shown to have the least faith in American institutions; there is indication by the rising numbers for an existence of a god.² According to Pew Research, millennials are the first stay connected generation. They are always connected to cell phones, social media, and their multi-task gadgets are treated like body parts and two-thirds of them admit to texting while driving.³ As an African American aunt and cousin to a few Millennials, this is personal and extremely alarming. As a believer, a developing leader and student scholar it is a relevant topic of research that could provide some valuable answers to the conversation in the church. “The Black Church has no challengers as the cultural womb of the black community. Not only did it give birth to new institutions as schools, banks, insurance companies and low income housing, it also

1 Sharon Cobbins, "Millennials: The Next Paradigm of the African American Church," Olivet Nazarene University School of Graduate and Continuing Studies, May 2016,, accessed January 10, 2018, http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/edd_diss.

2 "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious." Pew Research Center, November 3, 2015, 1-27.

3 Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change." *PewResearch Center*, February 24, 2010, 1-8.

provided an academy and arena for political activities and it nurtured young talent for musical, dramatics and artistic development.”⁴

How can the African American Church evangelize, disciple and protect our Millennials? It is with the love of God and effective evangelism. In this 21st century, The Black Church must strategically plan and develop ways to attract our Millennials and maintain their membership without compromising The Word of God. Thabiti Anyawhile pens it best. “Are Black millennials a problem for the Black church? I don’t think so-not any more than any generation of sinners needing to be rescued from God’s wrath through the person and work of Jesus Christ. All sinners are tone deaf until the Lord gives them ears to hear and conquer their heart by his sovereign Spirit and grace.”⁵

The Black Church

The Black Church has been identified, defined, characterized and criticized through the lens of many scholars and believers. “The religious dimension of black churches is found in the black sacred cosmos, a unique Afro-Christian worldview that was forged among black people from both the African and Euro-American traditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The black sacred cosmos permeated all of the social institutions and cultural traditions of black people. While the general structure of beliefs, rituals, and organizations of black churches

4 Lincoln, Charles Eric., and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black church in the African American experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005 p.8

5 <http://thefrontporch.org/authors/thabiti-anyabwile/>

remained the same as white churches, black Christians often gave different nuances and emphases to their theological views.”⁶ For some of our ancestors, the church has always been the safe haven of their community because they were co-laborers in the establishment of her. “According to Professor Jonathan Walton, for more than 300 years, the black church in America has provided a safe haven for black Christians in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class. Inspired by the story of Exodus, African Americans can think out, pray out and shout out their anger and aspirations, free from the unstated yet powerful constraints that govern dialogue with the larger white society. In the pulpit and the pews, in choir lofts and Sunday schools, the black church continues to offer affirmation and dignity to people still searching for equality and justice, still willing to reach out for a more inclusive, embracing tomorrow.”⁷

Giger, Appel, and Davidhizar, and Davis records “the Black church refers to churches that are predominantly African American Christian churches of any and all denominations that minister to African American communities in the United States”⁸ Farrah, and Taylor, Lincoln and Chatters recognizes the church as an important support component of the daily lives, experience and

6 Ibid.p17

7 God In America," PBS, , accessed March 08, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/black-church/>.

8 J.N. Giger., S.J. Appel, R. Davidhizar., C. Davis, Church and spirituality in the lives of the African American community. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, (2008) 19(4), 375-383. doi: 10.1177/1043659608322502

relationship of the African American that provides a sense of justice, faith, endurance, and hope.⁹ According to Bopp, Wilcox, Laken, and McClorin, “the Black Church is a place where individuals seek guidance and fellowship with others of the same beliefs.”¹⁰

The Black Church should continue to play a pivotal role in the development of the people called to her.

Purpose of the Study

“One of the major challenges black congregations are facing in engaging this new generation of would-be disciples actually stems from an essential part of the historic ethos of the black church.”¹¹ Hence, if this is fact, how can the Black Church strategically gather the millennials and maintain their fellowship without losing her historical foundation? During this turn of the twenty-first century, many congregations are pondering how to get this generation in their doors and participate in their ministries. This challenge is not just confined to smaller congregations but mega churches have the same questions.¹² There is a great need to connect this generation.

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L. Farrah, African-American churchgoers' perception of the church's role in the grieving process (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest's Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 1472316) (2009).

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M. Bopp., S. Wilcox., M. Laken, , & L. McClorin, Physical activity participation in African American Churches. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, (2009) 16(1), 26-31

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JOSHUA MITCHELL, *BLACK MILLENNIALS AND THE CHURCH* (S.I.: JUDSON PRESS, 2018), 27.

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Ibid.28.

More than 80 percent show up in church once a month and believe in essential spiritual development, yet only one-third of these same young people are actively involved¹³ Needless, to say, there are Millennials who serve the Body of Christ in excellence. They are active in churches; as laypeople and clergy. It's just not enough. As research is conducted; hopefully, ways will be found to bridge the gap without compromise. As recently stated by an Apostle at Redwine Church, the bottom line is we need millennials and millennials need us. The world tag and label people as a means to separate. As believers, we must bridge the gap among the aged and the young. We have so much to learn from each other.

Identifying the Problem

In his pursuit to better understand the Black Millennial and his ministry; Joshua Mitchell identifies the challenges not to be preaching, but the need to figure out how to effectively reach, keep, and disciple the Black Millennial in his congregation and surrounding community.¹⁴ Mitchell announces, "The winds have changed!"¹⁵ The winds change from generation to generation, the way to reach them varies. However, this is a generation of digital natives. This generation communicates in 140-character statements and 10 second videos.

There are many reasons Black Millennials are not engaged in church. The following list will highlight a few of them.

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Ibid.32

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Ibid xii

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Ibid.29

- They distrust the agenda of the twenty first century church and are suspicious of why they are seeking them to come into the fold.
- The narrative of the church and its leaders; as ignorant, insincere, hypocritical money hungry, and often behind the times.
- “Church hurt” and the threat of future church hurt is a major deterrent.
- Some are disengaged from church due to a lack of interest or the personality of the preacher. ¹⁶

Research Question

Is it possible for the 21st century African American church to show relevance; as she provides an effective way of evangelism to draw more of the Millennials back to the church and retain their membership? Some say that our Black Millennials are not leaving the church and this is a White issue being projected on the whole church.

Research Methodology

As a part of this research, interviews or survey’s will conducted with African American pastors or youth ministers with varied percentage of Millennials in their churches. A compare and contrast to determine what is making the difference in the congregation. Samples of example survey questions are:

- What is the denomination?
- What is the size of the Church? What percentage is Millennials?
- What is your philosophy of evangelism?
- Are Millennials in fivefold ministry roles, deacons, trustees, etc.?
- Are there auxiliaries just for Millennials?
- Do you have an active social media presence?
- Is there a specific ministry for this age group?

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Ibid 47-49

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Literature Review

The literature review for this research is based on dissertations, books, journals and articles on the subject of African American Millennials, Millennials and the Black Church. Also, substantial

material has been reviewed from faith based textbooks on evangelism. The research is current “somewhere near the mid-2010’s, organizations around the country became obsessed with the understanding of the so-called Millennial generation and its impending impact on various segments of society.”¹⁷ There has been a systematic academic process used to gather and gain information from experts in this specific field of study. Rev. Dr. Brianna K. Parker pens, “Not only is work on black Millennials unique and most honestly neglected, a resource allowing black Millennials to read the work of other black Millennials is premier.”¹⁸ The book that she is referencing is *Black Millennials & the Church Meet Me Where I Am* by Joshua Mitchell. This book has been a major source of reference. Several databases were used such as Galileo, ProQuest, ATLA and Goggle searches for current information.

The following literature is a sample of research materials but is not all inclusive. "Millennials: The Next Paradigm of the African American Church", a dissertation written by Sharon Cobbins records, “This topic is of vital importance because Millennials represent a generation of the so-called lost sheep, referred to in the Gospel of Luke. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus conveys the importance of the shepherd going after the sheep that have wandered away from the flock because they may not find their way back (Luke 15:4-7). Jesus expressed that every single sheep is worthy to be saved and the parable represents the importance of going after that which is lost. If the church is to recover this lost generation, it must address their decline in attendance and participation in order to support or ensure the survival of the church.”¹⁹

The Time Magazine article, *How the Church Can Get Millennials Back* reports that the image

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ibid. xi

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ibid.vi

of the United States as a Christian nation was contested by a new Pew study that revealed the significant drop of Americans identifying themselves as Christians. The study included all age groups and races but the trend was significant for Millennials.²⁰ It was further stated by Hale, “if the Pew report is correct, it seems that Americans don’t have far to travel to find missionary territory today. It’s in our backyards, on Wall Street, in Washington and it’s in our communities, our families, and even our own hearts, which have become sterile and cold amidst this globalization of indifference.”²¹

Religious Education Journal article ‘Why the Church Should Evangelize Black Youth This article is about the church role and the empowerment of the black youth by having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

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Ibid.3

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Christopher J. Hale, "How the Church Can Get Millennials Back," Time, May 14, 2015, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://time.com/3858933/pew-christianity-millennials/>.

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Ibid

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