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The purpose of this research project was to shine a light on Black people who are social justice oriented and have a current tension with the Black church. I address two overriding research questions: Why do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church still stay a part of it? How do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church navigate these tension-filled relationship and stay a part of the church? I use two qualitative methodologies to answer these questions; autoethnography and portraiture. In addition to my own story of navigating tensions with the Black church as a queer, nonbinary, genderqueer, Guyanese African American womxn, I share four portraits of North Carolina based Black community/political organizers, activists, and advocates, who maintain a relationship with the church, despite tensions. I describe what keeps us connected to the church and how we remain connected to the institution, the challenges, and the “church hurt” we have experienced. I conclude this study with recommendations for pastors, and congregation of Black churches.

“IT’S COMPLICATED”: BLACK PEOPLE WHO ARE SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTED AND HAVE A TENSION-FILLED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BLACK CHURCH

by

Josette Ruth Ferguson

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Approved by

_____

Dr. Kathy Hytten
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to those who are Black queer, trans*, or nonbinary that have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church and are navigating how they can stay connected to the institution. Don’t give up hope.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Josette Ruth Ferguson has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Revolution by Kirk Franklin (1998)

The Black church and its members raised me. They truly believe in the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child." They intentionally made time to guide me, advise me, discipline me, and nourish me to be a well-rounded person and young lady. Through their leadership and their willingness to give back to me and the other young people of the church, I learned firsthand about community and the importance of having a community in which to grow and learn.

My home church is a prominent United Methodist Black church in Greensboro, North Carolina. I say prominent because most of the members of my childhood church had influence in the city of Greensboro. Some members were professors at the local Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the area or were educators at the local predominantly white colleges and universities. Some members were educators and coaches at local high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools. Others were attorneys who had their own law firms, and some were directors of local nonprofits. There were a few who were deeply involved in politics through fundraising for local and statewide candidates and organizing volunteer opportunities for those candidates.

By going to church with so many distinguished, highly educated, and influential people, I cultivated a love of politics and community organizing. In addition, by frequently being a part of liturgical dance showcases and singing in every choir in the church (sometimes it felt that way), I developed a love for the arts, music, and dancing.

I refer to the church I was raised in as my "home church" because of the nostalgic feelings of security, closeness, and calmness that I feel whenever I step over the threshold into the building for worship. These feelings I embody can also be used to describe home. During my childhood, my home church was my home away from home. It was my homeplace (hooks, 1990). It was a place where I felt safe to be vulnerable and surrender (hooks, 1990; Boylorn, 2016); I was comfortable to forget about my worries of the world. Out of a seven-day week, I would at least spend three to four days at my home church. On Wednesdays, my siblings and I had children or youth choir practice. On Fridays my sister and I sometimes had dance or play rehearsals. But this only would happen if we had to perform at a guest church that weekend or were preparing for a major holiday service like Easter or Christmas. On Saturdays, my sister and I would meet at the church for Girl Scouts for two to three hours. On most Sundays, my mom would wake my siblings up around 8:30am to make sure we arrived on-time to Sunday School at 10am. Then after Sunday School, we would rush into service to either acolyte, usher, sing, or dance (our various service activities depended on what Sunday of the month it was).

Even though I attended church with many significant members of the Greensboro community, they were like extended family members to me. My parents are transplants to North Carolina. Upon arriving in Greensboro, my mom searched tirelessly for a church that she could call home for her and our family. A few years ago, my mom shared with me when she knew she had found our home church:

I was coming through the big red doors of the church, trying my best to manage with you and your siblings [At the time, I was 5, my sister was 3, and my brother was 2. We were quite small and a handful]. As soon as I entered, someone kindly greeted me and you three, and asked if y'all wanted to play in the nursery while I was in service. They asked if it was ok to take you there and I said 'yes'. When I came to get you after service from the nursery, you couldn't wait to show and tell me what you did while I was in service. I finally could breathe. Because I could just feel like this was the best place for us.

Since that day, my church members have been my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins in this city. I would often get scolded by Ms. Poole when I talked too loud backstage during a dance performance. Frequently, I was reminded to love myself and value myself worth by Ms. Clarke, Ms. Taylor, Ms. White, and Ms. Carrington. And whenever I would pass by Mr. Black, he would insist that I take a nickel to use for later to buy some candy or "something nice." These are just a handful of the people who influenced my upbringing and intentionally took time and created activities to breathe life into the timid shy child I once was.

I am grateful for the village of people who deliberately gave time and space to make me feel safe, validated, seen, and cared for. This dissertation in no way denounces their efforts. Yet, I would be remiss if I did not share that I have a current tension-filled relationship with the institution of the Black church. My tension with the Black church involves my sexuality, gender identity, and personhood. As I grow more into my gender expression as a nonbinary genderqueer womxn (I use "x" in replace of 'e' in women to represent womxn who identify as trans* and masculine), the more I feel insecure and unsafe with attending conservative Black churches. My home church is a conservative Black church. In conservative Black churches, respectability politics are heavily enforced and required for attendance (Harris, 2014). The politics of

respectability are “rules” devised by Black elites meant to uplift the Black race and correct the supposedly “bad” traits of poor Blacks so they can assimilate into white majority culture (Harris, 2014). In my home church, Black respectability politics looked like women and girls wearing dresses, skirts, and pants suits that were form-fitting, and boys and men wore collared-shirts, sports coats, ties, and pressed pants. Everything and everyone has their place in a conservative Black church. If you are not in your “correct box” of gender and sex, you will be ostracized and not welcomed to attend the church again. It is just that simple. Because of this, I do not feel free to be my full self at my home church anymore; I have the same feelings in many other conservative Black churches. I do not want to hide away my masculine identity in a puffy dress, itchy stockings, and uncomfortable high heels. That is not me anymore. I want my gender expression to be celebrated and respected when I go into a room. I am tired of being closeted. However, there are several days that I yearn to be back in church again. I miss the songs on First Sunday where the choir would sing Negro spirituals about “goin’ home to glory” while congregants ate small white rounded wafers and drank Welch’s grape juice out of shot cups for Communion. I miss singing in the choir and holding it down in the alto section when we sang *Emmanuel*. I miss the outpouring of love I once felt when I walked through the double doors into the church.

My heart, soul, mind, and body are conflicted. I long to chase after the nostalgic feelings of warmth, endearment, and acceptance that I once felt by attending church. However, as I grow into my gender identity and journey in my spiritual awakening, I am frequently triggered. Then I am reminded that the Black church is no longer my home. In this dissertation, I share autoethnographic accounts and portraits that I have co-created with research participants who have had similar experiences as I have to elucidate why we have a tension-filled relationship

with the Black church. This research may be difficult for some to receive, particularly since I critique problematic aspects of many Black churches, yet it is time for these to be told. In this chapter, I provide an overview and introduction to the study, including sections on the problem that motivated my research, the purpose of this study, my research question, background context, a description on the methods I used, the theoretical framework I used in the research, my role in my study, the significance of my research, and an overview of the rest of my chapters.

Are you ready for a revolution?

Statement of the Problem

Since joining the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's (UNCG's) doctoral program in Educational Studies with a Concentration in Cultural Foundations (ELC) in 2020, I have been determined to center my research on the topic of the Black church, with a particular interest in if and how Black people can learn about civic engagement within this space. My political organizing work and my civic engagement background in the Black church was my motivation behind doing this type of research. I started this program with the belief that the Black church was the primary convening space for Black political organizing in North Carolina. My religious upbringing made this idea true for me. Additionally, this idea was being reinforced by my employer at the time, Advance Carolina, which is an all-Black nonprofit that builds Black political power in North Carolina. This perspective of the Black church as the primary locus of political organizing blinded my view of other aspects of the Black church. I wanted to desperately find a space in the Black church, because otherwise my entire upbringing and career beliefs would feel like they were grounded in nothing and were all false. In order to prove myself right, I began to rely heavily on my romanticized memories of my childhood church to convince myself that the conservative nature of the church in other ways was not a significant issue, and I

doubled down in my professional work in Black church spaces. My assumptions of the Black church were all consuming to the point it was all I thought about.

"I have to be right about this. I can't be wrong…I just can't."

As I defended my preliminary exams in December of 2022, I had firmly decided that I would do research on the Black church and its role in civic engagement in North Carolina. Yet, after the thoughtful questions and comments from my dissertation committee and chair, I was led to sit and grapple with maybe going deeper with my topic. Below is one of the comments from my defense.

> *"Josette, I truly enjoyed reading your literature review of the Black church, yet I felt like you romanticized the institution. I really wanted you to dig into the criticism of the church more. Because there must be a reason why you aren't a part of the Black church anymore?"*

After my defense, this question along with others began to be on repeat in my head. I strived to power my way through the forest of questions that were planted around my topic of civic engagement and the Black church. But the more I tried to cut through the confusion, more questions arose. Eventually, I decided to write through the feelings that were coming up from my defense, particularly as I considered shifting my topic to study others who had a tensive relationship with the Black church but stayed committed, nonetheless. Below is an excerpt from that journal entry:

> *One of the reasons why I've been pushing against doing a topic on Black people who are social-justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church is because I'm scared. I am scared of what will come afterwards. And when I say afterwards, I mean after I complete this research. This right here is a topic that is close*

and near to my heart. Plus, I will be using my personal story as some of the research…I don't know if I can do this…I don't know if I'm ready for this research…But my story and others have to be told.

Being a part of a critical doctoral program like the ELC program has taught me that I must sit with the questions that I am trying to avoid and face what is coming up for me. At first, working through this research was difficult for me, but now I am beyond grateful that I pushed myself to take on such a topic. At the point that I was in my life and career when I started this project, it was critical for me to do research on the Black church and my tension-filled relationship with the institution. The questions I was having about my identity within the church did not fade away. Eventually they became like a thick cloud of fog. All encompassing. Hard to see and just very annoying. I decided it was best that I work through the fog while I could rather than thinking it would go away on its own. Do not get me wrong, there is still a need to research and write about if and how the Black church is still a site for African Americans to learn about civic engagement. However, after completing a literature review on the Black church and Black politics, there was little published and not much to mention about the complicated relationship that many Black people have with the Black church, and how this might impact their engagement in politics. Many scholars have studied how the Black church has been the foundation for many African American political leaders (Hill, 1990; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Harris, 1994; Sawyer, 1996; Gadzekpo, 1997; Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Brown & Brown, 2003; Harris-Lacewell, 2007; Owens, 2007; Liu et al., 2009). Why is the church romanticized and praised for being the institution to birth so many prolific Black civic and social-justice leaders? What about the Black political leaders who do not have a foundation in the Black church or have a complicated relationship with the institution? Where is the research on those people? In this

dissertation, I use my personal story of working in politics and my tension-filled relationship with the Black church to shed some light on the complicated relationship that I have with the institution. In addition, I share stories of other Black organizers, activists, and advocates who also have tension-filled relationships with the Black church. After reading this dissertation, it will be clear why some of us are still a part of this conservative institution, despite its flaws.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this research project was to shine a light on Black people who are social justice oriented and have a current tension with the Black church. For years, I have been scared to write about my tension-filled relationship with the Black church. My fear got to the point that it consumed me and then paralyzed and blinded me. In this blinded paralysis, I wanted to be numb and ignorant to the spiritual harm that I felt from my last church. I thought to myself:

If I try hard to forget what happened, then that means it never happened.

I desperately wanted to believe this narrative to the point that I recited it like a mantra.

If I try hard to forget what happened, then that means it never happened.

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If I try hard to forget what happened, then that means it never happened.

Over and over and over again, I strived to forget the memories of my last church. I needed to be numb. If I persisted to be numb, I did not have to feel the emotional pain of rejection from the only church I felt I could fully be myself. By being numb, I did not have to face the weekly affliction of longing to belong in a spiritual community that I could be safe in. In order for me to continue in my state of numbness and ignorance, I deeply focused on research to prove to myself

that the Black church and its clergy play a central role in teaching Black people about civic engagement and encouraging them to be a part of the United States' democracy. It was quite easy to remain in this mindset because where I worked at the time reinforced this idea. I let my implicit bias run the show to prove to my hurt that my emotional pain was not real. I yearned to believe that the Black church could do no bad but only good.

Despite my desire to believe that the Black church could do no wrong, I could not escape the nagging feelings of knowing that this narrative was false. I could no longer be in a cave of darkness tethered to others who believed this narrative (Plato, Grude, & Reeve, 1992). I had to break free of this narrative that I knew was personally untrue and damaging. I studied this topic and reflected more deeply on my own personal story, realizing that there are other Black people who are currently suffering with a tension-filled relationship with the Black church. I wanted to know more about their experiences too. For this research, I addressed two research questions:

1. Why do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church still stay a part of it?
2. How do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church navigate these tension-filled relationships and stay a part of the church?

At the outset, I want to make it clear that I did not undertake this research study for fame or notoriety. I conducted this research to use my personal story (along with others) to illuminate that there are many Black Christians who have a complicated relationship with the church yet still remain a part of it. Now is the time for a revolution, hopefully one that leads to reforms in the Black church. I hope this will be a revolution that will shine a light on the intricacies of the Black church and reveal why Black people (like myself) remain attached and tethered to the

institution while also experiencing erasure of their personhood, identity, and individuality. This research was not the easiest subject to tackle, because there are many who praise and protect the institution. Nonetheless, now is the time to have honest conversations surrounding the good, the bad, and the ugly of the Black church and have research to support these conversations. It is time for a revolution.

Do you want a revolution?

I'm ready…are you?

Background Context

Before I lay out the contours of this study, it is helpful to begin with some preliminary definitions and background. In this section, I define the "Black church" and provide some historical context about the church as a foundation for this study.

What is the Black Church?

The term "Black church" has primarily been used within the disciplines of Black studies and Religious studies to describe Black Christian faith institutions. This is a comprehensive term that includes all major historically African American Christian faith traditions and Christian faith traditions that African Americans take part in (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn, 2010). The term "Black church" embodies the religious communities tied together through the influence of Black participation in the United States of America (Pinn, 2010). Hence, when I refer to "Black church" or "Black churches" in this dissertation, I am considering *all* predominantly Black Christian congregations in the United States of America, which includes African Americans who participate in traditionally white denominations and lead majority Black churches in these denominations. I do understand that African Americans practice and participate in other sectors of religion that they may have tensions with. However, in this research project, I

was concerned only with African Americans with Christian faith traditions. In addition, it is important to note that the Black church is not a monolith, but is a collective of religious spaces. This fact was important as I conducted my research and wrote my analysis. All Black churches are not the same.

The Birth of the Black Church

There are seven major historically Black Christian denominations. Those seven denominations are the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the National Baptist Convention USA Incorporated (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America Unincorporated (NBCA), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Hill, 1990; Gadzekpo, 1997; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn, 2010). Every denomination listed, except for the COGIC denomination, was developed and cultivated through Black people making the decision to leave white-dominated denominations to form their own worship spaces (Gadzekpo, 1997; Hill, 1990; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Essentially, Black people created Black churches and denominations because they recognized that Black culture is a part of their Christian faith tradition and needed to be a part of their worship space. This was the primary reason why many of the seven denominations began, because many predominately white denominations did not recognize Black faith traditions and did not support Black culture within the church (Hill, 1990; Gadzekpo, 1997). In addition, Black Christians who forged Black churches out of white-dominated spaces thought anti-racial discrimination was, and should be, an essential part of Christianity, which was not an idea that many white churches and their congregations could wrap their heads around (Cone, 1969; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Ultimately, Black churches were born out of the idea and discernment that their God was antiracist, anti-discriminatory, and believed in liberation, freedom, and independence.

Since Black church spaces were built on the idea that God was antiracist and anti-discriminatory, it made sense that their worship spaces included a praxis of liberation. When Black people were enslaved, their learnings and teachings of Christianity were centered around freedom: freedom from bondage and slavery (Cone, 1969; Cone, 1977; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). It is a core belief of Black churches and Black denominations that Black people need political, social, economic, and religious freedom (Cone, 1969; Cone, 1977; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, Pinn, 2002). Through the creation of Black denominations, Black people now had a place to cultivate their own civil societies, develop their own culture, religious life, and political identity (Calhoun-Brown, 2000). Black people used their newly formed churches as a place to protest the racist ways of American society, and acknowledge that they could generate their own ways of liberation within their own faith institutions.

With the creation of Black denominations, Black people developed avenues of independence, which were grounded in Black experiences and self-sufficiency. After the development of Black churches and denominations, Black communities now had institutions that were focused on building up Black wealth and political power. Black churches were the "first independent economic and sociopolitical sphere among African Americans" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 178). Even though mainstream American society made it difficult for Black people to participate in American democracy, Black people made their churches democratic political spaces where they would elect their own officers, bishops, and church representatives at conferences (Hill, 1990).

The independence forged through the formation of Black churches and denominations made way for the development of Black Theology and Black culture that is centered on Black people.

The birth of the Black church came from Black people wanting to have worship spaces where they could celebrate their culture and be free to praise God the way they wanted. Through the dark times of slavery, Black people developed a consciousness that God was antiracist and anti-discriminatory. So, when they broke away from white-led churches in the late 1800s, Black people saw their churches to be grounded in a praxis of liberation, freedom, and independence. From its inception, Black churches have been more than a place for worship; they have been a hub for Black politics, Black economics, and Black life.

In this research project, as I previously mentioned, I defined the Black church to include *all* predominantly Black Christian congregations in the United States of America, which includes African Americans who participate in traditionally white denominations and lead majority Black churches in these denominations. Researching the birth of the Black church shows how social justice has been infused in the church since its founding. I found this information to be intriguing when I ran across it, and I wondered to myself:

Is this the reason why Black politics and the Black church are deeply intertwined?

In chapter two, I share more analysis on how the Black church is a site of political grounding and show why my study is important to the field of Black politics. Before doing so, I provide an overview of this dissertation, including a brief description of my methods (which I describe in detail in chapter three), theoretical influences, my role/positionality, and the significance of my study.

Brief Description of Methods

For this research study, I used two qualitative methodologies: autoethnography and portraiture. I conducted an autoethnographic study to share my story and my tensions with the Black church. I also interviewed four people several times in order to create a portrait of them and their current tension with the Black church. After I collected all data and completed my thematic data analysis, I constructed portraits of each research participant. In creating each portrait, I let my artistic strengths take the driver seat. In constructing each portrait, I use of narrative, dialogue, found poetry, and song lyrics to bring each participant's story to life.

Theoretical Overview and Framework

All research is influenced by theories about the world, even if we are not always able to articulate those theories in detail. A theoretical framework is basically a description of how a scholar thought about a topic, the lenses they used in the research, and why they look at the world the way they do. In this section, I discuss the theories that influenced my thinking about the Black church. I root my research project in the critical teachings of Black womanist scholars and I am heavily influenced by Black feminist thought and epistemology. I identify as a Black critical scholar and this orientation was vital for my study.

The Theoretical Lens I Brought to This Scholarship

As a community and political organizer who is also a social-justice researcher and activist, I infuse my personal experiences with what I learn in community in my scholarship and research. In my profession and research, I lead with a critical Black womanist lens, where I am heavily influenced by Black Feminist thought and epistemology. As a critical Black womanist, I draw upon the core teachings of Alice Walker's theory of womanism (Walker, 1983). Drawing upon this theory, I believe that the everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem

solving that Black women and other women of color use can assist in ending all forms of oppression and restore balance between people, nature, and reconcile human life in the spiritual dimension (Walker, 1983; Phillips, 2006; The Womanist Working Collective, 2022). As a womanist, I am committed to the survival and wholeness of my people in the African diaspora (Phillips, 2006). Despite the evolving conflicts that arise within the African diaspora, I strive to remain in community with my Black people: this includes Black men, womxn, and everyone else in-between. However, since I am a critical womanist, I do not lose my sense of self and my love for *myself* as I work to remain in community with my people. For me, this means I must forgive those who have done me wrong but hold firm boundaries to ensure that I do not keep getting hurt. This is why it is important for me to include the teachings of Black Feminist thought and epistemology with womanism.

I am more a womanist than a Black feminist because womanists acknowledge the spiritual dimension in their work and scholarship. However, I believe in and have drawn upon the four dimensions of Black feminist thought in this study. Those dimensions are finding meaning through lived experience, using conversations to gather knowledge, showing up in relationships with an ethics of care, and living in an ethics of accountability (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019). My lived experiences have assisted me in analyzing and presenting my data for this project. In addition, when I interviewed my research participants I related to them with an ethics of care, where I acknowledged them to be co-researchers and data analysts, because these folks hold their own data and their own personal analysis that they graciously shared with me. Throughout the entire process of this research, I was mindful of my own personal responsibility, which includes to be reflective and reflexive. It is important to me that I did not use any Eurocentric masculine criteria while approaching my research and data

analysis (Collins, 1989), so I did not create a transactional power dynamic. I did not want to create or reinforce a research hierarchy in my research project where I am seen as the only person who has wisdom.

My Role in the Study

In this section, I share more of my personal story, which deeply influences how I engaged with my research topic. I have mentioned already some of my memories of the Black church, and my tensions with the institution. However, my current positionality also shaped how I conducted this study. For this study, I filled many roles. I was a researcher, a participant, a portraitist, a data analyst, a poet, a storyteller, and an artist. These roles overlapped and were never siloed. I can never not be in any of these roles. Because I am all these things.

My Positionality

Let me introduce myself…

My Identity

I am they/them

I am Guyanese African American

I am a womxn, with a 'x' or 'y'

I am non-binary
Neither one nor the other, but two combined

I am queer, bending out of time and space

I am a political organizer
Making a way for my Black people
Changing the system
For future generations to come

I am a visionary
A futuristic thinker
Dreaming of worlds to come
That my physical body

May never ever see
But my spirit will witness

Most of all
I am me.

Beautifully made and crafted
Imperfections and all
Yet foremost
Someone meant to be seen, heard, and appreciated.

Josette Ferguson, *June 2021*

I am a queer, nonbinary, genderqueer, Guyanese African American womxn, who is an avid educator, facilitator, and political community organizer. I use my identities to connect with Black community members in North Carolina to expand the potential of Black political capital in the state. I have been working in political organizations in North Carolina since 2014. Much of the political work I have done, and the work I currently do, is with and for Black people.

This research project was quite important to me on a personal level because despite the home-like feeling I discussed earlier that marked my childhood relationship to the Black church, I also have trauma that is deeply intertwined with this organization and some of its members. I first started feeling tensions with my home church when I started attending college. I attended undergrad at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which is about 45 minutes away from Greensboro. Within my first weeks of college, I had realized that I had attraction for the same sex. And wanted to act on it. However, as soon as I named this desire, I began dating a man. Go figure! My boyfriend in college was handsome, kind, and caring, and he knew that I found women to be attractive. But this did not bother him. He accepted me and my curiosity for what it was. I was very focused on him and our relationship until my second year of college.

During my sophomore year, I fell madly in love with a friend, while dating my boyfriend for a year. To protect her identity, I will use the name Lisa. I did not know I fell in love with Lisa

until I was talking to one of my friends about her. I remember telling my friend, Brittany, about all the activities Lisa and I were doing together, and how much I enjoyed spending time with her. Next thing I know, my friend stops me in mid-conversation and says to me, "Josette, I think you have a crush on Lisa." I shrugged my shoulders and hesitantly asked Brittany, "Do you really think so though? Do you really think I *like her*…like her?" Brittany looked straight at me, nodded her head, and said, "Yep. You definitely like her like her." She paused for a second and then said,

> Whenever you talk about her to me, you began to blush and you start cheesing. Also, you spend A LOT of time with her. When's the last time you've spent time with your boyfriend…? I feel like you probably spend more time with her than you do with him. You are definitely crushing on her HARD.

I then nodded and said, "I think you're right Brittany…I think I do have a crush on Lisa….And I think I need to tell her…"

After that conversation with Brittany, I realized I was too scared to really tell Lisa my feelings. So, I decided to ask her for "advice" on what do with the romantic feelings I felt for "another" female friend. She advised me to **not** tell my "friend", and just try to forget about the feelings altogether. Interestingly enough, later that evening Lisa texts me and confesses, "Josette, I know that friend you were talking about earlier was me. And yes, the feelings are mutual. If you want anything to happen between us…you will have to make the first move." Flabbergasted I replied, "Ok…I'm not sure what to say…can we talk about this more in person tomorrow?" Unfortunately, nothing happened between Lisa and me. I ended up missing my window of opportunity, because I did not want to break up or cheat on my boyfriend.

Eventually, Lisa and I decided it would be best for us to stay friends. A few weeks later, she stopped all communication with me, because she "needed to focus on her school work more." Lisa's sudden departure from my life hit me hard. Her loss in my life was a gaping hole in my heart, mind, and soul. It was so hard for me to focus on anything else, but the feelings I had for her, and why she would leave me so suddenly.

Is it something I said…

Is it something I did or did not do???

What did I do to Lisa for her to stop talking to me altogether?

I really wish she would just talk to me….

I miss her so much.

This continuous flow of thoughts accompanied the tears that kept flowing from my eyes. Ultimately, my thoughts of dejection flooded my mind. This in turn made it hard for me to stay afloat in my studies. I ended that semester doing poorly in the majority of classes as well as deeply heartbroken. Lisa first was my first love and first heartbreak.

When I came home from school for Winter Break, I was distraught, lonely and afraid to tell anyone about what transpired between Lisa and me. I did not feel comfortable telling my siblings, or my parents. And I most definitely did not feel comfortable having a conversation about this with anyone at my church. This was the beginning of me thinking about what it would look like if I was with the same sex. Although, I discovered quite quickly in college that I found women to be attractive, and I wanted to have sexual experiences with women; I never thought about the possibility of being in a romantic relationship with one. During this point in time, I wrote this poem.

Fighting Sexuality

Being with the opposite sex
But knowing that there are feelings elsewhere
Feelings within the same sex
Feelings that can't be explain
Feelings that want to be discovered, but not sure exactly how
Is it time to explore...?
Or is it time to suppress the feelings more
More than it already has been done
Making you hate yourself more
Because you are trying to stay within society's norms
Even though you know you don't belong.

It's tough

To conform or Not to conform...
That is the question
Is it better to conform, but never truly fall in love
Or should you go against status quo
And go for a beau, that is the sex exactly like you
But can please you in a way that the opposite sex couldn't
However, facing society's cruel and harsh comments and beatings

In the end, it's your decision.
Do you fully want to be happy
But face society's harsh criticisms?
Or rather live day to day,
With someone you could never ever love,
But so you can be considered "normal?”

Remember you can never hide your feelings forever,
They are bound to come out somehow, some way.
Just do your best to hurt less,
Within your process.
The earlier you become one with your feelings,
The earlier you become one with yourself.
Leading to hurting less in the process,
While maintaining your self-worth as well.

Always keep in mind, God is with you on your journey
And he will never lead you astray, if you truly follow your heart.

Josette Ferguson, *Fighting Sexuality*

From December 2010 to September 2011, I experienced so much inner conflict around my sexuality. I grappled with the idea of what it would mean for me to be gay and Christian.

If I'm gay, does that mean I'm going to Hell?

Does that mean that God doesn't love me anymore?

Would God stop loving me, if I decided to be gay?

I don't think God would abandon me because of my sexuality…but then again I have heard several pastors preach that "homosexuality is a sin" and is "of the devil."

Do I worship the devil now?

I don't want to go to Hell…but I'm not sure what to do with these feelings.

I returned back to campus in the spring of 2011, and I tried hard to forget about my first love and to make it work with my boyfriend. As the fall semester approached, I found it harder and harder to put up the façade that I was okay with being with the opposite sex. But then, I met my fairy God lesbian mothers. Or I should say, the first lesbian couple I had ever met. At that point for me, it was like meeting a unicorn (it's definitely not like that anymore). They were madly in love with each other, and had been dating for two years at that point. This couple gave me the advice and strength to break up with my boyfriend of two years, and to go into the unchartered territory of dating the same sex. I cannot lie. I was scared and afraid that I was making a big mistake. But I was not happy with my boyfriend. Me and him were better off as friends. I am grateful for my fairy God lesbian mothers. They showed me that it was possible to be romantically involved with the same sex, and still have a joyful and fulfilling life. It was because of them that I had the courage to explore love and life as a lesbian. Yet, it would take years for me to feel comfortable to be out and proud in church.

I know God loves me, and supports me in being Queer.

God has not abandoned me, because of my sexuality.

God has embraced me with open arms.

I am not of the devil, but of so much love and light.

I am so glad I accepted my feelings for the same sex….I am at peace.

Now, I just wish people would stop telling me that I'm going to Hell.

I guess it's time to hide this side of myself.

I have to tone down my "gayness."

Despite this tension with the institution, I returned back to my home church once I completed undergrad. I went back, because I desperately missed worship, and my church family. I longed to feel connected to community, and be around people who knew me since childhood. I yearned to be deeply involved in worship like I was when I was a child. I missed singing in the choir. I missed dancing in the annual Spring concert. I missed welcoming people into the church as an usher. I just yearned to be deeply involved in church again, and feel like I mattered. I felt the most grounded in life, when I was a part of so many church activities. I needed that structure that church would bring, because my adult life (at the time) was so wayward.

As I began to regularly attend service, I gradually started participating in more and more church activities. Since I love to dance, it was natural that Ms. Poole was able to easily pull me back into liturgical dancing. This is something I missed greatly. Dancing in church is such a beautiful full body spiritual experience for me. Whenever I dance in church, I feel like I am floating on each step in time to the instruments in the song. I am transported to a higher plane, and I am communing directly with God and the angels. By dancing in church again, my spirit was somewhat fulfilled, however, something was missing. So I thought to myself, "What is

missing? Josette, you love to sing. Why don't I start singing in the Fellowship Choir?" Outside of dancing in church, I miss singing in church. I revel in harmonizing with my fellow choir members. It is such a euphoric feeling for my voice to be in tune, and in unison with others. It is so powerful. It is at these times when I feel goosebumps on my elbows, and on the back of my spine. Often times, this is when I feel like God is sitting in the audience; catching the spirit with the rest of the congregation. Nevertheless, after attending one Fellowship Choir rehearsal, I did not go back. I did not feel like I belonged there. It did not feel like the Youth Choir rehearsals that I attended when I was a teenager. Something was missing…So I again thought to myself,

> Hmm…that's odd. I thought that singing in the Fellowship Choir was going to help fulfill this gaping hole in my spirit. Hmm…what else might help feel my spirit up…my mom has been wanting me to be a lay servant…I guess I can give that a try.

As a lay servant (the person who leads worship), I would be obligated to facilitate service at least once a month. In this monthly duty, I would be required to stand in front of the congregation, and lead them in scripture, song, and prayers before the pastor preached. For the shy, timid person I was at the time, this was quite out of my comfort zone. Nonetheless, I was willing to give it a try. For about three years, I led service, danced, and served on one church committee. During this time, I found it difficult to fully be present in service, unless I was leading worship or dancing. Eventually, I got to the point that I realized that I had outgrown my home church.

I hate being one of the youngest people here.

I don't have the capacity to do everything, the elders want me to do.

Quite frankly, I don't want to do much of anything here anymore.

I don't feel fulfilled here, like I did when I was a teen.

This place doesn't feed my spirit anymore.

I think it is time for me to find another church home, where I can blossom…

Maybe I can find a church home that fully accepts my sexuality and embraces it…

That would be dope!

But where is a church like that located…

Is there a church like that in Greensboro?…

Luckily, I did find a church like that in Greensboro. While I was working as the state director for NextGen in 2018, I was connected to a young pastor. This pastor just started a church in Greensboro that was small group focused, intergenerational, people of color led, and Queer affirming. In addition, this church was Christian based, but used many Buddhist and African Ancestral practices and teachings. I quickly found myself growing in deep connection with this pastor as we discussed how we both wanted to persuade more Black people to get involved in voting. I loved that he was a community organizer, and United Methodist. Thus, when he formally asked me to be a part of one of his church's small groups; I jumped at the opportunity. I enjoyed being a part of that church. I felt seen, and cared for. I really felt like my opinion and my life mattered. It was at this church, when I started to grapple with me being nonbinary. And it was through this church where I started to explore Buddhism. Sadly, it was also at this church where I experienced an immense amount of hurt and trauma from one of the members. I am actively working on healing from that situation. And, I am learning what it looks like for me to be in spiritual community again. Since attending that church, I have not experienced anything else like it.

Despite the tensions with my sexuality and gender identity, and the trauma I experienced, I do not want the church to be destroyed. But, it does need to be improved. Frequently, my queer

nonbinary identity has been erased in Black political church spaces. Like a problematic relationship with an abusive parent, I have defended, romanticized, and protected the Black church and its members, while experiencing much pain and heartache. I remain in a relationship with this institution because I want to work with and alongside my Black people in building political power. I want to have access to the spaces and people who taught me to celebrate my Blackness, and supported me when I was growing up. Because of my upbringing in the Black church, I have so many deep relationships with people who are deeply entrenched in church. They often ask me questions like,

> *Josette, when do you plan on coming back to church? I really miss seeing you…*
>
> *Since you aren't going to church anymore, how are you tending to your spirit? I hope you're still praying.*

I rarely answer their questions because I do not feel comfortable with sharing my faith and beliefs with everyone, especially Black conservative Christians. And let me not forget to mention that my mom asks me almost every Sunday,

> *When are you coming to church? Ms. Taylor would love to see you and talk about what you're currently doing with work…When do you think you might come back to service?*

Constantly in Black church spaces, I am torn about how I should carry myself.

> *Should I fight for the use of my they/them pronouns in these Black church spaces and then be belittled and criticized for it?*
>
> *Should I "femme up" my appearance and hide away my masculine persona to make others feel safe and to be non-threatening? Yet, be misgendered?*
>
> *I am tired of having my gender identity erased, but I miss being in church.*

These are some of the tensions that came up for me as I traversed this research topic. I have accepted that it is more than okay to keep the church at arm's length. I will always love the music and will never forget the religious and spiritual traditions of the church. Those are ingrained in my spirit and my soul. But I will not allow for myself to be erased and to be closeted. I want to be my full self wherever I choose to worship. Lama Owens (2020) reminds me that in order to move through the tensions of trauma and heal from it, I have to love what is unlovable. He writes:

> One of the things that I practice is loving even what is unlovable. When I say I'm loving my trauma, it means that I am accepting my experiences of trauma and then allowing it to be there, accepting it, giving it space. And by giving it space, I have room to relate to the trauma in different ways and to engage in methods of releasing that trauma. (p. 211)

As I conducted this research, I learned that I must have a love ethic (hooks, 2001), where I love what is unlovable. In my case, I am learning to love and forgive those in my Black communities who misgender me. Furthermore, I have accepted the fact that I must create distance between the Black church and some of its members so I can be well. That is the only way I will be able to heal through my spiritual trauma.

As a budding Buddhist and United Methodist Spiritualist, I am constantly learning ways to bring my full spiritual self into my scholarship and political work. I work to bring my Christian, Buddhist, and Ancestral practices and teachings into my research and schooling. I use the crystals of Tourmaline, Tiger's Eye, and Rose Quartz often as a way to center and ground my energy before I facilitate and lead a discussion. Additionally, I am inspired by my Spirit Guides and Ancestors to use my singing bowl's vibrations to call my peers and colleagues into order so we can focus on the "higher" work that we are called to do. For me, that work is to

simultaneously heal myself and others as I ask my fellow Black people to move and heal past the trauma that we inherited so we can truly change the world around us. Throughout conducting this research, I used my singing bowl and crystals to ground myself. My work on this dissertation was difficult. But it was healing work. It opened me up and made me vulnerable for the world to see and ask questions. It was the right time to have difficult conversations with others who shared similar tensions.

Let the revolution begin.

Significance of My Study

My research on my tension-filled relationship with the Black church alongside the stories of others sheds light on why *we* have a complicated relationship with the Black church. This research is needed because the stories of Black people with tension-filled relationships with the Black church are not often told or amplified. In the next chapter, I point out the gap in research where I have tried to locate the stories of Black folks (like myself) who have and are experiencing a difficult relationship with the Black church. For whatever reason, these stories largely go untold. Through sharing these stories, I reveal the tensions that I and those who I interviewed have with the Black church. By disclosing these tensions, I have gained insights in how to improve the Black church for the future so that it is more inclusive. Moreover, sharing the stories of Black people who have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church, has made the challenges of the church concrete and visible. This was a scary thing to do. But if we never make these challenges real and transparent, then we can never improve the church for the better. I am optimistic that my research will generate conversation, where others will feel brave to share their stories about the church, including why they are drawn to it as well as the barriers they experience in terms of participation. Furthermore, I am confident that my research will

illuminate why some Black folks stay with the Black church despite their conflicting relationship. Let me make this clear, my research does more than highlight the unpleasant feelings and memories that my interviewees have about their Black church experience. I also share some the nostalgic and gratifying moments that my participants (and I) experienced. I think that the full range of feelings and experiences need to be present to provide a holistic view.

All in all, my study is significant because I identify some reasons why social-justice oriented Black people have tension-filled relationships with the Black church, which can then open up spaces for positive change. In addition, my research uplifts these stories that are often ignored and names memories of folx Black church experience.

Overview of Chapters

I organize this dissertation into eight chapters. In the next chapter, I review the research on history of the Black church, discuss the contemporary relevance of the Black church, and share critiques of Christianity as they relate to issues of social justice. In chapter three, I describe in detail the methods I used in this research study. Chapters four, five, six, and seven are the individual portraits of my research participants. In chapter eight, I conclude this study, share recommendations, and discuss what the future may hold for this topic.

CHAPTER II: LIFT EVERY VOICE

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Black National Anthem) by James Weldon Johnson (2000)

As I dove into the research on the Black church, I was reminded of Black History Month at my home church and my involvement in Black History Quiz Bowl. Attending a Black church that was filled with Black educators was a privilege during Black History Month. The elders of my home church made it their business every February to teach the young congregants a Black curriculum that we were not privy to in our public schooling. It is in my home church that I learned about local Black history like the Greensboro Four, and the founding of the historically Black and all-women college, Bennett College (which actually was founded in the basement of my home church). In the midst of learning and celebrating Black excellence each Sunday of February, we also sang Negro spirituals. Negro spirituals are historic songs that enslaved African Americans would sing that would sustain them in times of sorrow, loneliness, and hardship (Omo-Osagie, 2007). Throughout the course of February, I loved hearing about the extraordinary tasks and inventions that Black people accomplished, while also being serenaded by the music of my ancestors. By attending weekly February services at my home church, I began to develop a deep appreciation for Black history and a strong connection to my Blackness.

My deep love of Black history may have been sown at my home church, but it intensified when I started participating in the Black History Quiz Bowl. Every year from middle school until I graduated high school, I competed annually in the Black History Quiz Bowl. Starting early December each year, my teammates and I began studying our thick binder of Black history facts every weekend. Since my home church did not have their own Quiz Bowl team, my siblings and I competed with Providence Baptist, which is another local Black church in Greensboro. Come February every year our coach, Mr. Mason, had our high school and middle school teams prepared to compete and win in the annual Black History Quiz Bowl. Through that experience, I learned that my people have influenced the world in a multitude of ways.

Even though I have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church, I have many beautiful and impactful memories that are tied to the institution, which have all affected the person I am today. As I think back to my memories of Black History Month, I am grateful for the Black churches that had direct involvement in "blackening" my education. It was a privilege to study Black History every year and be introduced to a Black curriculum that was more than hearing about the more well-known Black figures like Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr. Furthermore, it was during Black History Month and in preparation for the Black History Quiz Bowl that I learned by heart every verse of *Lift Every Voice and Sing (*which is often considered *The Black National Anthem)*. For me, this song encapsulates what it means to be Black in the United States of America and makes me proud to be an African American. Both these experiences have instilled in me a deep love for Black history.

Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;

In this chapter, I analyze research on the Black church, Black politics, and the tensions people have with the Black church. I also discuss how my research fits into the scholarship on this topic. I divide this chapter into four sections. First, I discuss the history of the Black church, particularly in relation to political organizing and activism. Second, I discuss the current relevance of the Black church and politics according to religious, political science, and Black studies scholars. Third, I explore the role of the pastor and their theology in the Black church. Fourth, I examine the literature that considers the tensions that some Black people have with the Black church. Finally, I conclude by assessing the scholarship on this topic and explaining why my research is needed.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,

History of the Black Church in Politics

In this section, I discuss the history of the Black church in politics. I examine the history of the Black church and its politics during the eras of slavery, reconstruction, and the civil rights movement in the United States. I then discuss how some scholars have named the Black church to be historically a school for politics, where African Americans have developed civic and leadership skills, and politicians have been able to acquire political resources. I close by discussing gaps in the research and how my dissertation adds to the literature on this topic.

Black Church and Slavery

In the United States of America, the origins of Black Church and its involvement in politics date back to slavery. Even though there was no formal church during slavery and Black people were considered to be less than human, Black people made time and room to praise God and organize against their enslavement. Before the formal abolitionist movement, enslaved Africans would organize “secret worship services in the[eir] slave cabins and woods at night”

(Wilmore & Cone, 1979, p. 534). Within these secret worship services, Black people would sing, dance, rejoice, and make plans to escape slavery (Wilmore, 1974). As the abolitionist movement got underway, Black clergy, lay leaders, and churches, along with white abolitionists like the Quakers, constructed the Underground Railroad, which was a network of safe places to stay while Black people journeyed north to escape enslavement (Cone 1969; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For example, Bishop Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) used Mother Bethel AME church in Philadelphia to hide escaped enslaved Africans and helped them find their way to freedom (Augustine, 2020; Cone, 1984; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In addition, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church was the spiritual home for numerous Black legendary figures of the abolitionist movement like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth (Cone, 1969; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). These are just a few examples of many of how Black people used the Black Church in organizing against slavery. Although the Black church was in its infancy at that time, it was influential in shaping the lives of many Black people. This was only the beginning of the intersections of the Black church and politics.

Black Church and Reconstruction

During the period of the United States' Reconstruction, the Black church was heavily involved in American politics. Throughout this period, there were many Black clergy who were elected to office. In 1870, AME clergy, Reverend Hiram Revels of Mississippi was the first Black senator elected to Congress, and Richard H. Cain (who would become a bishop of the AME Church in 1880) served as a state senator for four years and then was elected to the House of Representatives (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn, 2002; Smith, 1994). Unfortunately, their time in elected office would be short-lived. During the next election cycle, newly appointed

African American lawmakers were quickly removed from their offices and new restrictions were put in place regarding who could participate in elections. Laws like the Grandfather clause (which gave eligibility to men to vote only if their grandfathers could vote prior to 1867), reading tests, and poll taxes were created to ensure that African Americans would not gain any more political power (Anderson, 2017; Finkelman & Finkelman, 2009). In addition, voter intimidation tactics used by the Ku Klux Klan fueled fear among African Americans, which deterred many Black people from going to vote (Anderson, 2017). The use of voter intimidation plus the passage of laws like the Grandfather clause, reading tests, and poll taxes made it difficult for African Americans to participate in the American political process until the late twentieth century.

Nonetheless, during the Jim Crow Era, African Americans used the Black church as a place to cultivate and generate Black political activity. The Jim Crow Era spanned from 1876 to 1960 (Finkelman & Finkelman, 2009). Within this time period, Southern states passed several laws and local ordinances (called Jim Crow laws) that made it legal to segregate Blacks and whites (Finkelman & Finkelman, 2009). These laws ultimately would require for there to be separate public facilities for African Americans (Finkelman & Finkelman, 2009). Since Black people were not allowed to be in white facilities and were denied citizenship and participation in the American electoral process, they made their churches a political arena where they elected and selected their own officers, bishops, and representatives to church conferences (Hill, 1990; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Furthermore, during this time, Black congregants used their churches as training grounds for important skills, for example, they learned how to chair meetings, pass motions, organize groups, and mediate competing interests (Harris-Lacewell, 2007). Despite African Americans being forcibly removed from the American electoral process and greatly

discouraged to never participate in it ever again, they utilized their churches as an arena to invest in political activity. When the opportunity arose for them to freely participate in political activism again, they would be ready, which would be during the Civil Rights Movement.

Black Church and Civil Rights Movement

Because African Americans used their churches to cultivate civic habits and skills during the Jim Crow Era, it is not surprising that the Black church was an important foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the Black church was a free and available meeting place for Black non-church groups to discuss the next protest or rally, or group together around an issue (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Sawyer, 1996). Additionally, the Black church was a funding source where secular groups and Black congregants raised money to financially fund the movement (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Sawyer, 1996). Also, many Black clergy used their churches and their pulpits to organize their congregation and the surrounding community around what was happening in their city and urge everyone to be involved in the work towards liberation (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Sawyer, 1996). More importantly, Black clergy and their congregants granted access to politicians to attend their church services to ask for financial contributions and political support, which helped many Black politicians get elected (Sawyer, 1996). The Black church during the era of the Civil Rights Movement was definitely a great benefit for Black people. It was a meeting place for Black groups to organize, a location to raise funding for the movement, and a hub for politicians to gain political support and financial contributions. Without the Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement might not have been as successful as it was for Black people. A number of scholars argue that the Black church has historically been a school

for politics where African Americans could obtain political resources and education, meet to discuss politics, and for politicians to campaign. I turn to their scholarship in the next section.

The Black Church as a Place and Space for Political Education

Throughout the history of the United States of America, many Black studies and religion scholars considered the Black church to be the focal point of Black politics where, among other things, Black people could learn civic and leadership skills, obtain political resources (like a meeting space and financial contributions), and African American politicians could campaign.

School for Politics

First, multiple scholars describe how the Black church was a place for political education. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) found in their wide-range mixed methods study of the seven historically Black denominations and its clergy that the Black church was an "intensive training ground of political experience" for Black people, where "leadership skills and talents could be honed and tested" (p. 205). Gadzekpo (1997) agrees with these findings. Through his historical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement, he noted the Black church to be instrumental in developing leadership qualities among African Americans so they could lead protests (Gadzekpo, 1997). In Hill's (1990) mixed methods study, he argues that the Black church is often a school of politics for Black people to learn how to "exercise power and affect policy" (p. 132). During 1983 to 1984, Hill (1990) interviewed 200 African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church members who were a part of ten AME churches who attended the Michigan Annual Conference, and he concluded from his data that the Black church allows its members to participate in politics "by providing them with the experience of democratic participation" which helps them to "develop political skills" (p. 132).

Besides being a political training ground for Black people and a place to experience democratic participation, the Black church was also where many African Americans have learned how to run a meeting and develop their leadership skills.

In their research, Harris-Lacewell (2007), Brown and Brown (2003), Harris (1994), and Liu et al. (2009), discovered that African Americans who participated in their churches internal politics learned skills that could be directly used in United States' politics. Harris-Lacewell (2007) illuminates in her research on African American religiosity and political behavior that Black people who are active in their churches learn about "chairing meetings, passing motions, organizing groups, and mediating competing interests" (p. 180). In addition, she found that by participating in internal church politics, many African American civic leaders like Reverend Jesse Jackson (an African American man who ran for President in 1984 and 1988) were given a civic education in church and that they later translated into their political work (Harris-Lacewell, 2007). Moreover, Harris (1994) and Liu et al. (2009) show in their research that through participating in internal church politics, African Americans have learned how to write letters to politicians, give speeches, and conduct professional meetings with Robert Rules of Order.

A Meeting Place for Politics

Even though the Black church has been used as an educational sphere for African Americans to develop civic and leadership skills, the Black church was also a site to host political organizing and activism meetings, and a location where African Americans could gather to discuss political ideas. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), Sawyer (1996), and Calhoun-Brown (2000) all show that the Black church was a central meeting space for political activists and organizers, community leaders, and just everyday African Americans to discuss politics throughout the Civil Rights Era. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) describe how the Black church was

a major place for mobilization for mass meetings and demonstrations. Furthermore, Sawyer (1996) and Calhoun-Brown (2000) mention that the Black church was the prime location to find free meeting space. In her research about the Black church and the Civil Rights Movement, Calhoun-Brown (2000) quotes the late African American Georgia Congressman John Lewis who named the Black church as the meeting place for community leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. He states, "The First Baptist Church became a rallying point, it became the meeting place, it became the place where students [...] [and] community leaders could come and discuss, debate and argue about what the city should become" (p. 171).

Although the Black church at one point was an exclusive meeting space for Black people to discuss politics, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) noted that the Black Church is not the only place to host those meetings anymore. They maintain that an "unintended consequence of the Civil Rights Movement and the desegregation of public accommodations is the decreased use of Black churches as meeting places for community groups and events" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 111). Since Black secular non-church organizations can meet at a number of places like "public schools, town halls, civic auditoriums, hotel conference rooms," and other large facilities, these groups are no longer dependent on the Black Church like they were in the past (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 111). This raises a question as to whether the Black Church is needed as much as it was in the past because now Black secular non-church groups have a plethora of options to choose from for meeting space. At the same time, this finding is at least 30 years old, so it may not accurately capture how often Black churches are used for political gatherings today.

Campaigning Place for Politicians

For politicians, the Black church has been a site to raise money for their campaigns and to garner support for their candidacy. Sawyer (1996) and Calhoun-Brown (2000) state in their

research that Black congregations have raised funds to keep many politicians and grassroot campaigns afloat. For example, Reverend Jesse Jackson used Black churches as the center of his 1984 and 1998 Presidential campaign, including to locate donors and solicit volunteers (Reichley, 1986; Pinn, 2002; Harris-Lacewell, 2007). Additionally, white politicians have used Black churches as a way to convince Black constituents to vote for their campaigns. For instance, New York Mayor Richard M. Daley, who was in elected office in the 1960s, distributed public funds to Black pastors in New York to secure Black votes (Owens, 2007). And when President Jimmy Carter first ran for president in 1976, Black politicians used their influence at Black churches to persuade African Americans to vote for him (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) go on to claim that the Black church has a continuous tradition of letting Black and white politicians speak from their pulpits; in doing so, "politicians sought natural constituencies, and the churches and clergy gained some leverage and influence" (p. 206). Politicians have capitalized on the influence of the Black church to the Black community in order to get themselves elected. Moreover, some pastors have used their congregation and their influence in the surrounding community to get elected to office. For example, Adam Clayton Powell, who was the pastor of the 12,000 member Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem, used his influence in the Black community and the church he pastored to get elected to the United States House of Representatives from 1945 to 1970 (Reichely, 1986; Smith, 1994; Pinn, 2002). All in all, many Black and religion studies scholars maintain that the Black church was a great place for politicians to campaign and secure resources.

Historically the Black church has been a site of political involvement and activism since the United States' antebellum period. In this section, I discussed the historic political involvement of the Black church during the periods of slavery, reconstruction, and civil rights. In

addition, I described how the Black church was a training ground for leadership and civic skills, a meeting place for politics, and a campaigning place for politicians. In my next section, I explore contemporary literature that depicts the Black church to be relevant in building up the Black community in politics.

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.

The Current Relevance of Black Church in Community and Politics

Many Black religion and political science scholars have investigated the relationship between the Black church, the Black community, and politics. In this section, I describe why some scholars have named the Black church to be a convener in community and politics, and how church activism happens in today's Black churches.

Black Church is the Convener

One of the primary roles of the Black church is to be a convener for Black social and political life. Wilmore and Cone (1979), Cone (1984) and Pattillo-McCoy (1998) assert that the Black church is the oldest, independent and encompassing institution in the Black community. In her ethnographic study on Groveland, which is an African American neighborhood in Chicago, IL, Pattillo-McCoy's (1998) described the Black church as a "school, a bank, a benevolent society, a political organization, a party hall, and a spiritual base" (p. 769). Similarly, in her field study of four Black protestant churches and four white protestant churches in Chicago, IL, Greenberg (2000) noticed that religious institutions "stand at the intersection of public and private life" and they serve "simultaneously as arbiters of social relations and purveyors of private values" (p. 379). She found that political communication can take two dimensions in church, which are "promoting and facilitating civic engagement and community outreach" (p. 382). Consistently, in his research of Black churches and government, Owens (2007) noticed that

the church can be the vessel of political engagement if a church wants to move beyond benevolence. In their study of voter turnout and African American politicized churches, Burnside and Pink-Harper (2014) argued that the historic role of the Black Church as "an organizer for African American social justice and political equality" is still a factor for today's Black political life (p. 16). All these scholars acknowledge the Black church to be the center of Black social and political life. Yet, how politically active a church depends on the pastor and the congregation.

Church Activism

There is a misconception of Black churches that whoever regularly attends any Black church will be motivated to be politically active. However, not every Black church leader wants to, and is willing to, lead a politically active church. Black studies and political science scholars describe politically active churches to be religious institutions that have leadership who wants to be involved in improving their local community and church, and members who support this mission (Harris, 1994; Billingsley, 2003; Brown & Brown, 2003; Liu et al., 2009; Augustine, 2020). At Black activism churches, members are more likely to join political organizations and are open to developing community development corporations (CDCs). Additionally, in politically active churches, political leaders are welcomed to speak, and there are open discussions on voting and being involved in the electoral process (Fitzgerald & Spohn, 2005; McClerking & McDaniel, 2005).

In more recent research, Mangum (2008) examined the connection between the Black church and party affiliation and demonstrated that a voting church (which is a place of worship where members are encouraged to vote) can influence African Americans to identify with the Democratic party. For those African Americans who do not attend a voting church, church attendance alone encourages them to identify with the Republican Party (Mangum, 2008).

No matter the results, each scholar has shown in their research that the Black church has an influence on their Black congregation and their political life.

Another reason why church activism works so well in Black churches is because of social capital. Brown and Brown (2003), Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005), Harris-Lacewell (2007), and Liu et al. (2009), all argue that African Americans attain social capital by attending church. Yet, these scholars' opinions differ when it comes to assessing whether all African Americans have access to efficiently building social capital by attending church. Putnam defines social capital as the "features of social life--networks, norms, and trust--that enable participants to act together [and] more effectively pursue shared objectives" (as cited in Liu et. al., 2009, p. 577). Within Black churches, social capital is created by the consistency of being an active church member and the trusting relationships members have established over time by attending church (Brown & Brown, 2003; Fitzgerald & Spohn, 2005; Harris-Lacewell, 2007; Liu et. al., 2009). By regularly attending a politicized church, African Americans are more in "contact with elected officials, political information, opportunities for mobilization and advice about identifying political interests" (Harris-Lacewell, 2007, p. 182). Moreover, regularly attending church can influence voting habits and political behavior.

Brown and Brown (2003) and Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005) study social capital in Black churches. In Brown and Brown's (2003) study, they investigated the effects of church resources on nonvoting activism, whereas Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005) sought to determine if there is a relationship between church-based organizational activities and political protest. Interestingly enough, both Brown and Brown (2003) and Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005) used the data from the 1993 National Black Politics Study in their quantitative research. Brown and Brown (2003) concluded that regularly attending church and being involved on church committees can make

someone more politically active. Fitzgerald and Spohn's (2005) findings differed. They found that church involvement does not inherently lead to activism. In actuality, they realized that activism is the result of organizations that facilitate "political protest by providing resources, opportunities and incentives to members" (Fitzgerald & Spohn, 2005, p. 1020). Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005) concluded that African Americans who did not go to college tend to attain social capital by attending a politicized church and college educated African Americans are able to develop more of their social capital through the membership organizations that they are a part of like their sorority or fraternity, as opposed to the church they attend (Fitzgerald & Spohn, 2005).

In more recent research, Swain (2008) and Swain and Mangum (2012) shared similar findings to Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005). In Swain's (2008) quantitative research examining the impact of non-electoral activism in a post-civil rights era, he argues that community-based organizations are more crucial in promoting social activism with Black Americans than the Black church. Swain and Mangum's (2012) findings are similar in their quantitative study comparing whether religious institutions have a greater influence on African American political behavior than secular associations. In this study, they showed that organizational memberships garner more political activism among Black people than the church (Swain & Mangum, 2012). So, it seems that any Black person who regularly attends a politicalized Black church can cultivate social capital and be influenced to be politically active. But African Americans who are college educated and are a part of other organizations outside of church can likely build more social capital there than at their church, and are often more significantly influenced to be a social activist through a college education.

Black Church and Community Building

Other than engaging in voting and activism work, the Black church engages in community building and policy advocacy. Black churches build community with their members and the surrounding neighborhoods by promoting mutual aid and self-help efforts, developing educational facilities like daycares and afterschool programs, hosting educational forums, and providing opportunities to engage those who need help (Ayers & Williams, 2013; Billingsley, 2003; Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Gilkes, 1998; Greenberg, 2000; Morris & Robinson, 1996; Nelson, 1997; Owens, 2007). When a Black church is seen as a leader and uniter of the Black community, it oftentimes can hold a significant space in local public policy and guide political discourse (Ayers & Williams, 2013). Also, a Black church can be a political broker between the Black community and the local government. Owens (2007) illuminates this in his ethnographic research of church-state collaborations in New York City. In his research, he observed that Black churches who had community development corporations (CDCs) utilized these corporations to provide assistance to Black neighborhoods in New York (Owens, 2007). Owens (2007) found that the majority of the Black church CDCs performed acts of "policy advocacy and constituent education over acts of electoral assistance and contention" (p. 183). CDCs were directly involved with policy makers and bureaucrats, where they lobbied, testified at public hearings, contacted public officials, and organized town halls for their Black constituents (Owens, 2007). Thus, these CDCs were a political arm for these Black churches in New York. Each of these churches used their CDC to effect change of local policy to better the lives of the people in their city. Even though this study was done in New York, there are a number of Black church CDCs across the nation that are still around today and operate similarly. These scholars elucidate that Black churches help build community among Black people by promoting and organizing programs that

assist those in need. Additionally, some Black churches create CDCs to advocate on the behalf of African Americans to local bureaucrats and policy makers, so there are local laws that benefit them.

All in all, the Black church is a central convener of Black social and political life. In politically active churches, Black parishioners who regularly attend build social capital and are exposed to political information and encouraged to be involved in voting and activism work. However, some scholars argue that college-educated African Americans obtain more social capital by being involved with other organizations like sororities and fraternities. In addition, Black churches assist with uplifting the Black community by organizing and offering opportunities where those in need can come and participate. Some Black churches establish CDCs to become political brokers for African Americans. There is also often a religious motivation for Black churches to become political, an issue I turn to in the next section.

Role of the Pastor and their Theology in Political Activism in Political Activism

There is a range of perspectives on the role of Black pastors (in their churches and surrounding Black community) from the viewpoint of Black clergy leaders. Some Black pastors take more of an authoritarian approach by making decisions for their congregation, whereas other Black pastors are more prone to listen to their congregants and let them guide their work in community. I noticed that there is no consensus among scholars on the right or wrong approach for Black pastors in their managing style. Yet, I would be remiss if I made it seem that every Black church was the same. As I have made clear in chapter one, the Black church is not monolithic. Therefore, all Black pastors, and all Black congregations are not the same. The information I share in this section is from the perspective of Black religion and political science

scholars, theologians, and pastors of the Baptist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) on the role that pastors have in politics and civic engagement.

Disagreement on the Role of the Pastor

As noted in my previous section, some Black studies and religion scholars have argued that Black church members should be credited for politically impacting their churches. However, other scholars elucidate in their research that the church's pastor and clergy may have a significant influence in making their congregants and churches more politically active. In Billingsley's (2003) mixed methods study of 315 Black churches in the United States, he shares that 86 percent of senior ministers said their role as clergy was to serve the members and the community. Both Baptist pastors, Ayers and Williams (2013) would agree with these findings. In their book, *To Serve This Present Age* (2013), they identify scriptures that pastors can use in their sermons to persuade their church members to be more politically active. Ayers and Williams (2013) believe Black clergy leaders should equip their congregants and their communities with the "important facts, issues, and statistics related to specific justice issues" so they can make the best civic decisions for themselves (p. 24). Additionally, they provide tips and anecdotes in their book on how Black clergy leaders can best educate their flock. One of those tips is that Sunday morning announcements are the best time to engage their congregation because they have a captivated audience. For pastors Ayers and Williams (2013), the role of the Black pastor is to educate, engage, and empower their congregation to do something about the injustices that they see in their community.

Although some Black pastors are community leaders and social justice teachers for their community, not all Black pastors have the same freedom or adopt an activist role. Many Black pastors need to be granted permission from their congregation for them to be politically

involved. Theologian Pinn (2010) and AMEC Senior Pastor Augustine (2020) noted that some Black pastors take guidance from their congregation. Augustine (2020) argues if a pastor wants their church to be politically active, the degree to which they can make this happened depends on how receptive their congregation is to the idea. Also, in order for a Black church to be politically active, the pastor would need to have some level of political identity (Augustine, 2020). Citing McDaniel (who is a prominent scholar of Black churches), Augustine (2020) presents four conditions that make a church politically active:

> The pastor [leadership] is interested in involving his or her church in politics; the members are receptive to the idea of having a politically active church; the church itself is not restricted from having a presence in political matters; and the current political climate both necessitates and allows political action. (p. 103)

For a Black church to be political, the pastor and the congregation must be on one accord. Pinn (2010) concurs with Augustine (2020) on this point. Even if a pastor is heavily political in the pulpit and the surrounding community, this does not mean that their congregation will completely agree with that perspective and their degree and level of activism (Pinn, 2010). In many cases, it seems like the role of the Black pastor is to be amicable with their church members and allow the congregation to guide how political a church might become.

Ultimately, there is not a clear expectation for how active a pastor is politically in a church or the surrounding community. It truly depends on the pastor, and the history and wishes of members of the congregation. In the next section, I dive deeper into literature from scholars who believe the pastor's role is to use theology to liberate the mind of their congregants.

Theology of the Black Church

From the research of Black theologians and some Black pastors, some argue that the role of the Black church and its clergy is not to be a political agent in their church's community, but to be a place where their congregation learns to make sense of their world. In the research of McDaniel (2013), McDaniel (2018), McDaniel et al., (2018), and Philpot and McDaniel (2020), they argue that there are three types of religious tradition that Black pastors often use in their sermons: social gospel, prosperity gospel, and Black liberation theology. The social gospel religious tradition emphasizes social solidarity, equality, and action, whereas the prosperity gospel tradition promotes individual prosperity in financial bliss (McDaniel, 2013; McDaniel, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2018; Philpot & McDaniel, 2020). Black liberation theology places the "Christian experience in the Black experience" (McDaniel et al., 2018, p. 263). In this religious tradition, Black pastors use their sermons to liberate the minds of their Black congregations by convincing them that their blackness is something to be proud of (Cone, 1969; Wilmore, 1974; Cone, 1977; Cone, 1984; McDaniel et al., 2018). This religious tradition was born out of the Black Power movement and founded by Wilmore and Cone (1979).

There are some Black studies and religion scholars who would argue that the preaching of these three religious traditions impact how politically active a Black congregation becomes. McDaniel's (2018) and Philpot and McDaniel (2020) show that pastors who preach social gospel sermons have congregations that are more politically active than those who hear a prosperity gospel sermon. However, more research is needed on the theology of a Black church and its impact on Black congregants and their voting habits and civic participation.

There is no consensus on the expectations on how politically active and social justice oriented a pastor should be in their congregation. It really depends on the pastor, their congregation, and if there is a desire from the community. Furthermore, the religious traditions of the social gospel, prosperity gospel, and Black liberation theology may have an influence on how politically active a church can become, especially if one of those approaches is prioritized above others. However, this is a topic that needs to be further explored. In the next section, I examine scholarship on the tension-filled relationship that some Black people have with the Black church, which sometimes has to do with a misalignment between the theological approach and the desires of members.

Lift every voice and sing

Tensions with the Black Church

In my research, I found that the patriarchal leadership of the Black church has made it difficult for Black women and members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans* (the * identifies people with gender expressions outside of traditional norms such as transgender, genderqueer, agender and nonbinary), and Queer (LGBTQ) community to have a tension free relationship with the church (Douglas, 1999; Douglas, 2005; Douglas, 2012, Barnes, 2006, Piper et al., 2019; Benbow, 2022; Lewis-Giggetts, 2022). In this section, I share findings from researchers of sexual health, mental health, and Black church scholars who have reported these tensions.

Being a Woman in the Black Church

In recent scholarship, there are two authors who have bravely shared their personal stories about being women and the gender-related tensions they have with the Black church. Benbow (2022) and Lewis-Giggetts (2022) have written about the discrimination and prejudice they have seen, felt, and witnessed regarding Black women and the church. Benbow (2022)

vulnerably recounts seeing her single mother be called out and belittled for having a child out of wedlock. Because she was the daughter of a single mother, Benbow (2022) had to live with Black pastors and her fellow parishioners making sure she did not forget that her mother had committed a "sin" when she was born. Douglas (2005), Barnes (2006), and Piper et al. (2019), share similar experiences to Benbow's (2022) personal story. In her critical theological discourse on womanism and the Black church, Douglas (2005) reveals that there are many Black women who are victims of sexual or domestic violence who have not been provided adequate spiritual or emotional support by their male pastors and are instead blamed for the violence that they experience. Based upon her quantitative study on the Black church and women in ministry, Barnes (2006) describes that there are two types of churches: churches who are generally supportive of women holding cleric positions and open to women pastors, and churches who are outright against women leadership. Barnes' (2006) noted that among all the Black denominations, Baptist and COGIC are least likely to support women clergy.

In Piper et al.'s (2019) recent qualitative study of the gender norms and sexual health of Black female church members, they confirmed the results of Douglas (2005) and echoed Benbow's (2022) story. Piper et al. (2019) reported that several of their participants discussed how the church traditionally placed a high social value on women's virginity and punished those who deviated from this expectation. In addition, Piper et al. (2019) noted that once a woman is in church leadership, the challenges are significant if she gets pregnant, especially out of wedlock. Benbow's (2022) mother suffered those very consequences when she was promoted to church leadership but was unmarried with a child. Black people who identify as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, and Queer (LGBTQ) community also face discrimination and oppression in some Black churches.

Being a Part of the LGBTQ Community in the Black Church

For the past century, there have been ongoing tensions between the LGBTQ community and the Black church. As a member of the LGBTQ community, I have felt many of these tensions firsthand. In recent scholarship, researchers have gathered the stories of LGBTQ members experiences within the Black church. Douglas (1999) and Barnes (2012) described how during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, some Black churches refused to help those who suffered from the disease. Both Douglas (1999, 2012) and Barnes (2012) explain that many Black churches and their leaders associate gayness to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and used the Bible justify why they would not help those who are suffering, simply put, because being gay is a sin. Hipp et al., (2019) adds onto the research of Douglas (1999) and Barnes (2012) in their qualitative study of LGBTQ parishioners in Memphis and the Black church reinforcing rigid gender roles that leads to "church hurt". Hipp et al., (2019) define church hurt to be the "psychological and emotional harm done through the regular sermons and religious rituals that characterize being gay or trans as an abomination" (p. 889). They argue that the civil rights activism on racial justice and activism for the LGBTQ community that has taken place in Memphis are parallel, yet rarely intersect (Hipp et al., 2019). While there is a small but growing body of research on the tensions Black people experience with the church, particularly related to norms around gender and sexuality, there are many stories left untold. For me, knowing more about how people navigate the tensions they feel with the church can help make the institution more welcoming and inclusive.

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,

Summary

This literature review is only a snapshot of the vast amount of research on the role of the Black church in Black politics and social justice activism. The majority of the research I reviewed used quantitative methods of inquiry. Several of these studies used national data sets and surveys that were more than 10 years old. In the few qualitative and mixed studies I read, there were only a handful focused on a Southern population and only a few that focused on those who have tension-filled relationships with the Black church. Additionally, a lot of the studies were published by Black men and hardly any authors discussed their positionality and how it connects to their research. I consider this to be a major limitation to a researcher's scholarship, because our position in the world impacts our research. Readers need to be aware of the bias and blind spots a scholar may have and should understand how close (or unfamiliar) they are with their topic of research. This all impacts someone's scholarship. Also, for most publications, scholars were associated with the following disciplines: Black studies, religion, political science, and sociology. From my perspective, the lack of attention to the Black church in the discipline of education is also an important gap in the research.

Because of the limited research currently available in the field of Black politics, the Black church, and the tensions with the Black church, I know my research is unique, timely, and valuable. Historically, research in this field has been dominated by cis and older Black men who are clergy or related to clergy. My positionality alone grants me a perspective in this research that I have not seen discussed in the literature in any depth. I am a Queer, nonbinary, Guyanese African American womxn, political organizer, education scholar who has a current tension-filled relationship with the Black church. My unique positionality sets my scholarship a part and provides a perspective that has yet to be explored or discussed in this field, at least as far as I

know. As I describe in detail in the next chapter, I conducted an autoethnographic study and created four portraits of North Carolina Black people who have current tension-filled relationships with the Black church for this research.

Let us march on till victory is won.

CHAPTER III: I NEED YOU, NEED ME

I need you, you need me
We're all a part of God's body
Stand with me, agree with me
We're all a part of God's body
It is [God's] will that every need be supplied
You are important to me
I need you to survive
You are important to me
I need you to survive

I Need You to Survive by Hezekiah Walker and the Love Fellowship Choir (2002)

Intentionality is important to me. When I am intentional, I take the time and energy to think and emotionally care about the people I am in community with. In doing so, I strive my hardest to break away from the expectations and constraints of the white capitalist society of which I am a part. White capitalism expects me to see myself as an individual, especially when I am in community. It constrains me in complaining and blaming a system that was not created for people like me (Black and Queer identified folx) to grow and thrive in. You and I need each other to survive (Hezekiah Walker & the Love Fellowship Choir, 2002, Track 12). If we are important to one another, we have to listen and hear each other. This intentionality was essential for this research project.

In this study, I used two different types of qualitative-based inquiry: autoethnography and portraiture. I used both of these methodologies so readers can intimately learn about my ongoing struggle with the Black church and the unique stories of my participants who share similar struggles. Since naming our tensions towards the institution of the Black church was not an easy task to do, I made a finished product that was aesthetically pleasing, rewarding, and accessible to all those involved. It was important to me that each portrait read like a novel or poem, therefore, anybody can engage with the findings (this includes those who are not in academia).

In this chapter, I discuss the intentions behind my research by first providing a brief overview of my pilot study. Then, I describe each qualitative method and the reason why I chose each one. Next, I lay out how I collected data for this project, and how I conducted data analysis. Lastly, I discuss the ethical considerations, limitations, and how I reported my findings.

Preliminary/Pilot Study

In the fall of 2021, I conducted a pilot study, where I interviewed two Black pastors in the Triad region of North Carolina. The research questions I had for the study were:

1. What role do Black North Carolina clergy play in Black communities participating in voting and holding their elected officials accountable?
2. What is the relationship between Black political organizing in North Carolina and Black North Carolina churches?

To answer these research questions, I did a field observation of the Zoom recording for the *Black Power. Black Faith. Social Justice Seminar* that was held on July 29th, 2021, interviewed the North Carolina Black Alliance (NCBA) Faith Based Coordinator, and interviewed a local Black United Methodist pastor. Since I worked for NCBA at the time, I did some backyard research, where I researched the organization that I was affiliated with (Glesne, 2016).

From the data I collected, I identified three topics of discussion: (1) the purpose and role of today's Black Church, (2) the purpose and role of today's Black pastor and clergy, and (3) the need for Black clergy leaders to make time for self-care. My participants in this pilot study (as well as the information I gained from the observation) led me to believe the Black church should return to its historic roots, reclaim its moral tradition, and center itself in co-governance. The role of today's Black Church should be to be a voice for the Black community, a point of contact, a political agent, and an institution to guide the Black community into the future. In addition, both

Black clergy leaders who I interviewed argued that today's Black pastors and clergy members should promote Black political consciousness among their congregation, have a theological imagination to guide their congregants, and be organic theologians. A theological imagination means being able to translate the words of the Bible into everyday language and life so that the average person can understand it. Furthermore, my interviewees recommended that today's Black clergy leaders should strive to be community organizers who work in collaboration with other churches and secular organizations to improve society for the better. They also noted that self-care is essential for Black pastors and clergy. What I found most intriguing about this pilot research is that each research participant spoke about tensions that they had with the institution of the Black church, even while being heavily involved. Also, both clergy leaders emphasized the importance of making time to take care of themselves and their families, which is crucial for their work with the Black church.

These broad findings from my pilot study helped me to narrow down the focus for my dissertation and identify research questions for this study. I was amazed and intrigued that both of my participants, who were Black clergy leaders, disclosed that they have current tensions with the Black church. That is what got me thinking more deeply about my own tensions and led me to my current research questions.

Research Questions

From my Fall 2021 pilot study, I was left wondering why both these Black clergy members have tensions with the Black church, yet nonetheless stay involved. Is it because they are both radical and younger than many of their counterparts? Or is it because of the social justice work that they do in their community? These questions and more kept circling in my head. I tried to ignore, suppress them, and brush them off. But, I could not escape my curiosity of

wondering why, especially given my own tensive relationship with the Black church. These reflections led me to want to answer the following research questions:

1. Why do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church still stay a part of it?
2. How do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church navigate these tension-filled relationships and stay a part of the church?

Even though my pilot study consisted of two social justice oriented Black clergy members, I did not want to limit my dissertation research to be solely about clergy. I wanted it to be relatable to more than just clergy members but everyday social justice oriented Black folx. Also, if I focused on clergy, I would not have been able to write about my tensions with the Black church, which I feel are valuable to this analysis. Thus, I broadened my pool of participants to be Black social justice activists, organizers, and advocates who navigate a tensive relationship with the Black church.

Methodology

For this research project, I used the qualitative based methodologies of autoethnography and portraiture. Below I describe each methodology, focusing on how I used each in collecting data for this study.

Autoethnography

I was introduced to this methodology during my first year of my doctoral program in the spring of 2021. As I entered the Zoom room on the first day of class, I did not anticipate this course would change my life. Yes, I know, you as a reader might wonder how a research methodology class can have that effect on anyone. It does when your life (memories,

experiences, relationships, etc.) is your only data in your research. You are then compelled to dig through, sift, sort, and mine the "meanings of memories as they rise into consciousness or emerge in story or dialogue" (Poulos, 2021, p. 28). We have the choice (we always have a choice) to return these memories back to the rubble of debris of which they were found. Yet it is difficult. For me, engaging the memories I unearthed during this class was unavoidable. I could not ignore or evade the memories that I had uncovered in my daily required writing. I had to keep writing through this rubble of debris. Since that class, I have not stopped digging through, sifting, sorting, and mining the meanings of my memories, especially those related to my experiences with the Black church, from being a home place on the one hand, to being a place where I am often unwelcome to bring my full self. That is how I uncovered my research question about why Black people who center social justice in their lives stay involved in the church even when they have a tension-filled relationship with some of its history and practices. In my daily writing practice, I exposed a large piece of metaphoric scrap metal that was lodged deep in my brain capacity. Ever since removing it, I could no longer avoid this question. I had to answer it. The methodology of autoethnography helped me answer it for myself, and it left me wondering how others like me navigate their church identity.

Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of academic writing" that uses the researcher's lived experience as data (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). The researcher (who is also the holder of the story) connects insights from reflecting on their experiences to their identity, cultural traditions, emotions, values, and the larger social, cultural, and political context (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnographic writing is personal and vulnerable (Pelias, 2016). The author/researcher allows their life to be put on display for others to peer in, comment, and Potentially pass judgment on it.

Autoethnographic researchers take these risks so that others may learn from their insights and experiences. I assumed these risks in this project.

For my study, I shared details of my life experience that I analyzed and interpreted as data. In order to do this, I wrote a lot, because writing is the primary method of inquiry for autoethnographers (Poulos, 2021). Through the writing process, autoethnographers "discover, inquire, explore, and show rather than tell a reader what is known" (Poulos, 2021, p. 17). I produced autoethnographic data for this research by exploring topics surrounding my childhood memories of church, the tensions I felt as I was growing into my sexuality and gender identity, and my hopes for the future with my religious identity all in my writing. Something that I love about this methodology is that it provided me the freedom to showcase my findings in a creative way. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2016) elucidates, "autoethnography frees artists from writing dry accompanying narratives," it allows the researcher to "write in such a way that our creative identity can be fulfilled through the autoethnographic writing process rather than be restrained by it" (p. 456). As you may have already noticed throughout this dissertation, I have incorporated my autoethnographic findings in prose, poetry, dialogue, gospel song lyrics, and African proverbs. You will find pieces of my autoethnographic accounts in chapter one, two, and eight. In these accounts, I share elements of my joys of church, my tensions with the institution, how I am still connected with it, and where I am currently in my faith journey. I intentionally included various modalities in my autoethnographic sections so that my story is accessible for Black Christians outside of academia. I wanted my story to be "useful and meaningful for others" (Boylorn, 2013, pp. 8-9) and be relatable, and accessible for that community. Therefore, there are multiple entry points for readers to engage with this topic and to find meaning. Alongside of my own story, I also created four portraits of those I interviewed.

Portraiture

Complementing my autoethnography, I chose portraiture as an additional method of engaging thoughtfully with this topic, while creating a product that is unique for academic spaces and engaging for everyone who reads it. Drawing on this methodology, I made portraits of each of my research participants from what I gathered in observations of them and through a series of individual virtual interviews. By studying the voices, mannerisms, and experiences of my research participants, I unpacked their perspectives and experiences with the Black church (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I attempted to "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality" of my research participants and conveyed their perspectives as they negotiate these experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Throughout this research project, I was considerate and compassionate in how I portrayed the stories of my research participants. As they shared the most vulnerable pieces of themselves, I worked to ensure that I presented them as experts on their own lives with valuable knowledge and wisdom.

In order to center the words and voice of my participants in their portraits, I built authentic relationships with each of them while engaging in discourse in a thoughtful way (Lawerence-Lightfoot, 2005). Lawerence-Lightfoot (2016) illuminates:

> In lots of ways portraiture resembles most kinds of good, deep, layered qualitative inquiry. You're using in-depth interviews over time, observations, and participant observation; you're using document analysis and mapping the context. And you are, of course, creating relationships with the people who you are interviewing and whose lives you're trying to capture, that are trusting and communicative and respectful; you are working on creating and sustaining authentic encounters. [...][Portraitists] go deeply into this individual's story, hoping to capture more universal themes.

> The work is deep and penetrating, but must never be voyeuristic. (p. 22)

As I navigated vulnerable conversations with my research participants regarding their experiences surrounding the Black church and their tensions with the institution, my main goal was to be respectful of their stories. I did not want to exploit them. And, I wanted to make sure that each participant had some voice in how I constructed their portraits. I did this by regularly conducting member checks. I will go into more detail about this in the trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Something else I liked about portraiture is the innovativeness of the methodology. By using portraiture, I had freedom to be creative. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain:

> Academicians tend to speak to one another in a language that is often opaque and esoteric. Rarely do the analyses and texts we produce invite dialogue with people in the "real world." [...] [However] with its focus on narrative, with its use of metaphor and symbol, portraiture intends to address wider, more eclectic audiences. The attempt is to move beyond academy's inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive, and to develop texts that will seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them. Portraitists write to inform and inspire readers. (pp. 9-10)

I want this research project to transcend the world of academia and reach those in my local community. In order to do that, I purposefully studied the experiences and insights of those I interviewed and brought their stories to life in creative and engaging ways. As you read each portrait, you will notice that each chapter reads like a story with poetry breaks and song lyrics mixed in. This was intentional. It felt natural to write my participant's vulnerable accounts of the church into beautiful narratives and to format their words into found poems. I will discuss my strategies for crafting their portraits more in the reporting data section of this chapter.

Ultimately, I chose to use the methodology of portraiture as an additional approach in this study because it encouraged me to remain reflective and reflexive. In being reflective and reflexive, I made it a habit to take time to consider the implications of my research on my participants. Since all of my participants see value in the Black church and do not want the institution to be eradicated, I made sure to make each portrait to be as balanced as possible. What I mean by balance is that in each chapter, I honors some elements of the church and critique others.

Setting

My study took place across the state of North Carolina. I chose North Carolina, because I am from here and it was easy to recruit participants because of that.

Data Collection Methods

For this project, I collected data from September 2023 to November 2023. Since I completed an autoethnographic study along with portraiture, I will describe what data collection entailed separately for each method.

Data Collection for Autoethnographic Study

As I have mentioned in the autoethnography section above, in order for me to produce material for this research, I engaged in a systematic process of reflective journaling about my own experiences with the Black church. From September 2023 to November 2023, I wrote daily for at least for 30 minutes. In those daily writing sessions, I discussed a set of topics and answered questions for myself that I derived from my literature review and experiences (see Appendix A). The daily writing sessions I completed accompanied the interviews that I conducted, as I discuss in the next section.

Data Collection for Portraits

In addition to writing about my own story, I created portraits of four North Carolina based Black community/political organizers, activists, and advocates, who currently attend or once attended a predominately Black church and have a current tension with the Black church. Each participant was older than the age of 18. Since North Carolina is located in the Bible belt, I thought it might be difficult to find a diverse group of Black people willing to openly talk about their tension-filled relationship with the Black church. Therefore, I recruited each participant by using my personal network. By using my personal network to share the recruitment flyer, I was able to finish recruitment for the study in a matter of two weeks.

Once each participant agreed to the study, I conducted three interviews each with the four research participants. During October 2023 to November 2023, I did all 12 interviews. I conducted and recorded each interview using Microsoft Teams; each lasted between 40 to 80 minutes. Interview times varied based on participant's engagement with each topic. As I mentioned above in the portraiture section, the three in-depth interviews that I conducted with my research participants helped me build authentic relationships that were grounded in trust. This aided me in capturing contours of their relationship with the Black church in the portraits I constructed (Lawerence-Lightfoot, 2016). Prior to each interview, I sent a list of questions to each participant. This assisted me in establishing comfortability and trust with my participants, because they had time to review the questions in advance. Additionally, in order to ensure my participants were mentally grounded for our interviews, I prepared breathing and mindfulness exercises. I describe these exercises in Appendix D. Even though, I did not have to use any of the exercises in the actual interviews, I am glad they were available. In addition, each participant had access to a licensed mental health professional, who's contact information was located on their

consent form. I am not sure if anyone reached out to the mental health contact, but again I am glad it was available to them. Below are the three areas of focus I used for each round of interviews (interview guide in Appendix B).

Round One Interviews - Beginnings and Belonging

Round Two Interviews - Tension and Conflict/Where you are Currently?

Round Three Interviews - Looking Forward

Following each interview, I journaled my initial reactions, reflections, connections among my story and those of the research participants, and anything else I felt compelled to write about. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call this documenting an Impressionistic Record. Keeping an Impressionistic Record throughout my data collection assisted me in discerning patterns and themes in the experiences of my participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Moreover, it provided me with ongoing reflections that I used in constructing each portrait.

Once each recording was uploaded into Box, I transcribed it, and sent the transcript along with my observation notes to each participant before our next interview. By sharing my typed transcripts and notes, I generated space for my participants to not only review what was said in the interview, but to make certain that they were sharing their story in a way that resonated with them. Prior to this research, I was reminded by hooks (2001) that in order for us to heal our communities, "which are diverse and multilayered, we must return to a love ethic, one that is exemplified by the combined forces of care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility" (p. 4). As a researcher, I believe I have a responsibility to my research participants to be kind, compassionate, and provide empathy as they disclosed some of the deepest parts of themselves. This is why it was essential for me to share my observations and typed transcripts with them throughout the entire interview process.

During the last round of interviews, I mailed hand written thank you notes with a $25 visa gift cards to show my appreciation to my participants for making time in their busy schedules to share their stories. Also after my last interview, I let participants know when they would be receiving an outline of their portrait. This was vital so that each participant was aware that our last interview was not our last time together. It was just the beginning of my analysis for their individual portraits.

Data Analysis

Once I finished my last interview and completed my autoethnographic study, I coded each transcript and journal entry as part of doing a thematic analysis of all my data. This analysis entailed me looking for recurring topics, patterns, and key insights in my data (Glesne, 2016). My goal was to "arrive at a more nuanced understanding" (Glense, 2016, p. 184) on why my participants and I still remained with the Black church despite the tensions we experienced. I did this by identifying emergent themes that helped me to tie the pieces of each participant's story together with my own. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that "emergent themes occur within and across the stories, language, and rituals of subjects and sites" (p. 232). In order to capture themes and patterns in my data, I read and reviewed every entry I wrote for this project, read each transcript, and went through my Impressionistic Record. As I reviewed each piece of data, I jotted down any recurring and provocative words and topics, what qualitative researchers often refer to as codes, that I noticed on a sheet of paper. From the list of words that I jotted down, I grouped liked ideas to eventually be able to come up with categories in my research and identify themes (Glesne, 2016). It took me two rounds of coding for me to clearly identify my themes and categories for this project. Once I determined themes and categories, I

then outlined each individual portrait. After completing each outline, it was sent to each participant to get their feedback before I started writing each chapter.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

As I prepared to study my current relationship with the Black church along with the experiences of those I recruited as participants, I realized early on that I would be biased in this research. Conducting this research study was quite emotional for me. In order to mitigate ethical dilemmas in this research, I engaged in consistent reflexivity about my subjectivity, which helped me to bracket my own assumptions and experiences while I conducted each interview. In this research project, I engaged in reflexivity by being critically self-aware about how the roles I played in my research and carried influence throughout the entirety of this study. For me, this meant knowing that my positionality as a researcher, a research participant, a church member, a portraitist, and an artist would influence my data and research. Wanda Pillow (2003) defines research subjectivity:

> [As] a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis – that is, an acceptance and acknowledgement that 'how knowledge is acquired, organized, and interpreted is relevant to what the claims are.' (p. 176)

By being self-reflexive in this research project, I recognized that there were going to be times I was biased in my research because of my life experiences. Naming that reality helped me to decenter the assumptions that I have about social justice oriented Black people who have tensions with the Black church. I did not want to lump my research participants' stories with my own, because their stories are all unique. I wanted to make sure I was able to listen to my participant stories with open ears and an open mind, where I led with compassion that created a

pathway for empathy without judgment (hooks, 2001). In this sense, I saw my participants to be experts in this research and myself as a learner (Glesne, 2016).

Often in this study, I was not only reflexive about my subjectivity, but also *reflective* and frequently *self-reflected*. For this research, I defined reflection/self-reflection as making time to think about and assess how I showed up in my research. This meant that I made time to carefully think about how I interacted with each research participants to best respect their time and their expertise. Being reflective also meant that I made time to acknowledge the feelings that naturally arose inside of me as I took on this emotional topic. This is why I made space for my research participants and myself to feel all of our feelings and stay embodied during the interviews. Over the past two years, I have developed a praxis of wholeness, self-care, and embodiment. Lama Owens (2020) defines embodiment as being "the work of returning home to the body" (p. 119). Embodiment practices include mindfulness and visualization exercises, body scans, and breath work that assist practitioners to relax their bodies and minds, so they can be fully present in their bodies. During my interviews, I offered my participants the chance to go through an embodied exercise, so we were both fully present for our heavy conversations. As I mentioned, I did not lead any mindfulness exercises during these interviews as the participants did not take me up on the exercises I had planned, but I am glad I had them available.

To ensure that my research participants had some agency over their stories and their ideas, I conducted member checks quite regularly. Member checking is a way to invite in the participants of a research study to give critical feedback on their interview transcript and the researcher's data analysis to ensure that what the researcher has compiled resonates with the participant (Glense, 2016). I did member checks after each interview, after I completed data analysis, and once I completed each portrait. Member checks after each interview entailed me

sending an email with the full transcript along with my observation notes to the participant. In the days leading up to the next interview, I asked each participant to send me their feedback of what I sent. I asked participants to let me know if they wanted me to remove details from their transcript or if they wanted to elaborate more on an idea. Depending on the feedback of the participant, I either updated the transcript to include the new information or brought up that information in the next interview. To conduct member checks for data analysis, I sent each participant an outline of their chapter. Based on participant feedback, I had to rework some of the outlines, which I was more than willing to do. Once I completed each portrait, I sent them to the respective participant for their individual feedback. Based on the participant's responses, I added and omitted information in their chapters. In particular, there was two participants who truly enjoyed giving me feedback on their chapters. I must say without their feedback, I would not have been able to do justice to their stories as thoughtfully as I did. I am so grateful that each participant was willing and open in doing member checks with me.

In addition, to ensure that my participants understood their rights in this study, I went through the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) process. Within this process, each participant signed a consent form which detailed the purpose of this study and their participation rights. A sample of their consent form is in Appendix C. The consent form noted that the participant may choose to withdraw at any point of the study with no consequences. And, I left it up to each participant to decide if they wanted to be anonymous in their portrait. My participants Renee and Anna chose to remain anonymous, while Rev. Adon and Haikoo wanted their real names to be used. Rev. Adon used his real name to model the kinds of transparency and vulnerability that he hopes to see in the world. I know in many qualitative-based studies researchers advocate for removing their participant names and providing pseudonyms to provide a cloak of anonymity

(Glense, 2016). However, I wanted my participants to make that choice in this study, so they have agency around their story. I can only assume that they all made the best decision for themselves.

Even though my greatest concern in my research was finding participants and honoring their stories, I could not lose sight of myself and how I was directly impacted by this research. bell hooks (2001) reminds me that in order for me to be self-loving, I have to take care of my body and mind. Once I officially started collecting data, I increased my therapy sessions to guarantee that I took care of my emotional and mental health, especially because some of the experiences of my participants were triggering to me. As I journeyed in my autoethnographic research, I remembered Robin Boylorn's (2016) insight in her research that autoethnography is "like a two-way mirror, is part reflective and part transparent" (p. 174). With this research being a two-way mirror, there were times that I felt I could not escape my reflection. There were moments that I felt like a prisoner in an interrogation room. That's when I had to take a break from research, because it was becoming triggering for me. However, there were times that I felt like a lead researcher looking *through* the two-way mirror making observations and reflections with my research team on our interviewee (which is actually myself). I am thankful that I thoughtfully put in place measures at the beginning of my research to make sure I was well during the duration of this study. This surely went a long way for me.

As I completed this research, I reflected often on my own experiences and biases related to the topic. I deliberately took this in consideration to make certain that I was not blinded by my assumptions in the research, and I was able to fully hear and acknowledge the stories of my research participants. By including my participants in frequent member checks, they held the

reins on the direction of their stories. This aided me in constructing thoughtful portraits that each participant appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed.

Limitations

In this research project, I considered the following limitations: the scope of my project, time available, and the amount of resources available (researchers, money, et cetera). Since I was the only person interviewing four people, I was not able to fully represent the experiences of a large population of Black social justice-oriented folk who have tension-filled relationships with the Black church. If I had more time, I would have tried to recruit participants who were from Generation Z. I personally feel like their voice is missing in this research. Since I had limited time, I had to have a finite scope for this project. The limited scope in this project assisted in me deeply highlighting the unique stories of my participants and myself, so that our stories encourage conversation and future research in this topic. The very nature of qualitative research generally involves studying a small group of people to observe nuances and to bring meaning to the individual stories of a population (Glense, 2016). And that is what I did in this project. In the future, I would love to do a larger study on Black social justice-oriented folk who have tension-filled relationships with the Black church. However, the combination of four portraits and my own autoethnographic narratives are a great start to understanding some of the nuances of a tension filled church relationship.

Organization of Findings

Prior to writing my finding chapters, I knew my goal was to bring to life the story of each participant, by using multiple forms of representation, beyond simply written prose. So I kept this in the back of my mind, as I prepared to write each portrait. Once I began writing, I was decided to format participant's long quotes into found poems. Found poetry is a "method within

poetic inquiry" where the researcher extracts "words from transcripts and shap[es] them into poetic form" (Pate, 2014, p. 6). When a researcher is composing found poetry "there is no template or prescribed approach" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 88), therefore, I trusted and followed my instinct as I created each poem. In order to be able to fully engage with each poem, feel free to reference Appendix E, which has a guide in how to read the format choices incorporated in the found poems. Other than using found poetry within each portrait, I also included narrative, dialogue, song lyrics, and a Bible verse. I used these mediums because they came naturally for me. Each modality just seem to fit in perfectly within each portrait, which in turn made the portraits read like a story. In addition, there is a playlist and a song I created for this dissertation. Those can be found in Appendix F and Appendix G.

In addition, as I constructed the portraits of Renee, Anna, Haikoo, and Rev. Adon, I drew upon the theory of womanism (Walker, 1983) and the epistemology of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019). For my Black woman identified participants, I heavily relied on womanism. Womanists believe the everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving that Black women use will assist in ending all forms of oppression and restore balance between people, nature, and reconcile human life in the spiritual dimension (Walker, 1983; Phillips, 2006; The Womanist Working Collective, 2022). Throughout Renee and Anna's portraits, I did my best to uplift their critiques and tensions they had with the Black church, along with what they enjoyed and their suggestions for improvement.

Moreover in crafting each portrait, I used the dimensions of Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019) as a guiding light. The dimensions of lived experience, the use of dialogue to assess knowledge, the ethics of care, and the ethics of personal accountability remained in the front of my mind as I decided how to intentionally

construct each portrait from each interview transcript. While protecting the personal and vulnerable stories of each participant, I was intentional in the content and quotes I incorporated in each portrait. Therefore, all material I used from my participant transcripts in this research drives my project forward. I focused on the most salient aspects of their faith journey and their tensions with the Black church.

In the next four chapters, I present the portraits of Renee, Anna, Haikoo, and Rev. Adon, who are all North Carolina Black social justice folx that have a current tension with the Black church. Based on the data collected, it was clear that each person does not want the Black church to be eradicated. Yet, each participant recognized that the church needs to be improved. Something I did not expect was that every participant had experienced some type of trauma at church. And, three out of the four participants flagged that they had attended churches where the pastor and church were heavily focused on money. Even though, the participants had overlaps in their experience with the Black church, each portrait is different.

In chapter four, I share how Renee navigates tensions with the church and her fellow congregants as she strives to grow in her discipleship. One of her biggest tensions in her portrait is that the churches she has attended do not have classes to teach Christians the essentials of being a Christian. In order to fill this gap for herself and others, she is using her faith-related business to create material around discipleship.

In chapter five, I describe how Anna grew frustrated with her church leadership because they continuously ignore her suggestions to create a mental health ministry. However, through her faith in God and her belief in Divine Guidance, she believes she could help the Black church be a healing space again.

In chapter six, I share Haikoo's hurt-filled journey with the Black church, which has led him to no longer be a Christian or be a part of any Black church. Since leaving the church, he now has peace within himself and his spirit. In his current faith practice, he sees truth in all religions, and regularly practices and leads mindfulness activities and meditation. Despite Haikoo not being a Christian anymore, he still feels connected to the Black church and attends occasionally to support his friends and his family..

In chapter seven, I shared Rev. Adon dynamic and tension-filled journey with the Black church and Christianity. Recently, he was ordained as a pastor in the Omnist religion. He is looking forward to growing his ministry and teaching people how to better take care of themselves while also showing up for their communities. Like Haikoo, Rev. Adon is no longer a Christian. However, he stays connected to the Black church so he can politically organize with Black pastors and their congregations and to create lasting change.

CHAPTER IV: LEARNING TO BE THE BEST DISCIPLE SHE CAN BE

Jesus, bring a new song
Out of my trials, out of my pain
Jesus, precious Jesus
Oh that my whole life would bring You praise
[…]

Get Your glory, get Your glory
Get Your glory out of me
Every drop, every ounce
Get Your glory out of me

Get Your Glory Out of Me by Anna Golden & Todd Galberth (2023)

Renee is a millennial living in central North Carolina who uses she/her/hers pronouns. For her portrait, Renee asked to be anonymous. So in this chapter, I don't share any specific identifying information that might reveal her identity. For our three virtual interviews together, Renee took them on her laptop in her home with her four sons playing in the background. While answering a question, Renee either looked up or into the distance. And, when she was not looking around, she gave eye contact.

Renee's chapter is organized into five sections. In section one, I describe her introduction to Black church and the belonging she feels in Black church spaces. Section two is about her tensions with the Black church and how she has navigated the tensions she's experienced with the church. In section three, I share her faith journey. Section four is dedicated to how the Black church, and her faith, have shaped and influenced her social justice work. Section five is the advice she has for those navigating tensions with the Black church. Chapter five, six, and seven all follow the same structure. This structure worked well to capture the intricacies of each participants early experiences with the Black church, as well as their current tensions with the Black church and where each of my participants are at on their faith journeys.

Introduction, Fond Memories and Belonging to the Black Church

In this section, I discuss how Renee was first introduced to the Black church, the fond memories she associates with the Black church, the moments when she started feeling like she belonged to the church, and why she feels at home in Black church spaces. Renee first was introduced to the Black church when she was a child. Her Godfather is a minister and it was his church that she first attended. She cannot remember her exact age, but she can remember what she was wearing.

I just know whatever that age is,
you know where our mom's like to put us in those cute little
(makes gestures with her hands)…
Whatever those ruffly socks are.

Researcher: Oh yeah scratchy dresses.

Yeah, that age, yes.
[That is when I first started attending church]

Wearing ruffly socks and scratchy dresses was just one of the many memories that Renee recalled about attending church as a child. Some other memories she shared included a church trip to Carowinds she took as a teenager, and the fun she had with the other kids at her Godparents' church.

Um (smiles)
Probably my best [memory],
(chuckles)
[…]
Is in New York,
At my godparents church.

The bathroom was downstairs in the basement,
so a bunch of the kids would just be
down there *playing around*
and not really using the bathroom.
And then getting in trouble afterwards.

But it was still fun.
(chuckles)

Even though Renee has fond memories around her childhood church experiences, it would take her until her adult years, when she started taking ownership over her choices, for her to feel like she belonged to a Black church.

So when I was 27.
I decided to go [to church] because *I wanted to go.*
I wanted to build my **own** relationship.
With God…
I wanted to get to **know** Christ better.
God better.

Uh and volunteering in church because I wanted to.
Not because I was told to.

At the age of 27, Renee started frequently attending church because she wanted to build her own relationship with God. From that time forward, Renee has found it to be important that she attends a **Black** church, because attending a white church or any other church is just not for her.

I'm not going to no white church.

I need to be with my people.
[…]
I wanna be with the people
That know what it's like
to be not necessarily
Me
but to be **in my skin.**
[…]
They know what **Black** struggle is.
[…]
what [my] struggles [are]
or what my struggles look like.
[…]
I feel like I could connect better
With [my people]
[…]

I feel more comfortable
[with <u>my people</u>]
[…]
I feel safer
[with <u>my people</u>]

[…]
I just feel like they would know
how to pray and war for me
should I need it.

I just wanna worship with <u>my people.</u>

For Renee, worshiping and attending church with other Black folx makes her feel comfortable and safe. This is why she chooses to attend Black churches. Despite this connection she feels to the Black church, she still experienced challenges.

Naming and Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

From childhood until the present, Renee has had tensions with the Black church. She feels that the church needs to do better with their discipleship, that many churches are too focused on money, the cliques that are created in church need to be dismantled, and that people in church need to be more authentic.

One of Renee's biggest tensions with the Black church is that many churches do not focus on discipleship. For Renee, discipleship programs in churches should be required, because they teach Christians the essentials of being a Christian and how to be a faithful follower of Christ.

The churches I've been to,
[and] when I hear people talk about their churches,
they don't really have a **<u>good discipleship program.</u>**

So it's kind of like […]
when you're coming back into church,
Or even if you just wanna do it continuously,
Or if it's your first time;
you know,

you're new to building a relationship with God.
[Or you want to be a better Christian].

[There is no program to help with that]

It's just kind of like,

"Hey, you're a part of the body of Christ.
Now hop on in
and ***serve***
or ***volunteer*** *somewhere*
or ***get on [a] board,***
[and] ***make sure you are in your Bible everyday****".*

A good discipleship program
will help folks understand.
the *essentials* <u>of</u>
being a <u>Christian</u>.
[…]

A lot [of] churches say,
they have […] new disciples' classes.

But I feel like it's just another Bible study.

And while discipleship programs
do study the Bible.
I just feel like it's a general Bible study
[Rather than a special program
for us to be better Christians.]

Renee believes that a church must be a *Bible-based* church in order to have a strong discipleship program. She defines Bible-based churches to be, "churches that […] teach out of the Bible, […] and connect life to the Bible, versus connecting the Bible to life." For the most part at a Bible-based church, the pastor is using the Bible to drive their sermons. In these churches, the Bible is the *focus* and the *guide* for everything that happens in the church. For Renee, it is important that she attend a Bible-based church, because she believes it is the word that Christians are supposed to live by. In actuality, Renee did not grow up in a Bible-based church. Because of that, there were many things she did not learn until later in her faith journey.

I would say the church that I grew up in
was not a Bible based church.

Yes,

we read things out of the Bible,

But we did not learn *essential[s].*
[…]
We didn't dissect different things.

We didn't go through like the history
and things like that.

It was just [like],

"This is what the Bible says.
This is what it's supposed to "mean"
This is how it connects to me kind of thing."

By not growing up in a Bible-based church, Renee missed out learning how to decipher the Bible for herself, to read and make her own meaning of what she reads, and to develop an in-depth understanding of the essentials of what it means to be Christian.

Another tension that Renee has with the Black church is that some churches she has attended are deeply focused on money.

All churches […]

you know,

talk to their folks about
tithes and offering.

It's very important.

I mean,

there's *no way*
the church could run
if they did not receive tithes and offering.

But you know,

you can *get the feeling*
out of their check for
them.

[One church I went to]
[…]
had folks that worked in their church…
[and] ***they would take the 10%***

[that] **some churches** are
money hungry

[…]
I 100% believe in tithing.
I tithe.
I've gone through periods of my life
when I didn't tithe
Because I really couldn't afford to tithe.

but that's not the church's,

in my opinion,

it's <u>not the church's place</u>
to take their tithes out of their check for them.

Renee understands the purpose behind tithing and how important it is for her and her fellow congregants to tithe. However, it is frustrating for her to know that a church would boldly take 10% of their employees check to give back to the church, especially without giving them a choice over how to spend the money they earn.

it's not the church's place
to take their tithes out of their check for them.

Renee also is not a fan of the cliques that tend to form in the churches she has attended. She has seen cliques form among people on the worship team, and among people who are deemed *popular* in church. She calls these types of people "Christian Instagram Folks." These are the people who "really care about […] followers" and the "superficial stuff that really gets churches in trouble." Also, these are the "'Christians who care too much about keeping up with the Jones's, and the latest trends, [and] […] may not be heavily involved in social media in a Christian way. They are 100% putting on a front." Renee feels like these cliques are "where a lot of tension and trauma come into play" in church and wants to figure out a way to "dismantle the cliques that happen within church."

Unfortunately, there was one tension that Renee named that was the primary reason why she left the church for 10 years. She found out that the women she looked up to were liars and cheaters.

I was 17 or 18 years old…
And I <u>found out</u>…
(scratches head),

that there were ***some cheaters.***

[…]

[These women] were being
unfaithful…

to their husbands.

Uh…they were,
wrapped up in
a lot of drama.

And just not being truthful.

Not to say that cheaters are gonna,

say,

"Oh, I'm a cheater.
Here I am."

But **don't preach**,
[…]
about <u>being faithful</u> in marriage
and all this other stuff
<u>that you're NOT doing.</u>

This experience deeply impacted her and turned her off of church for a while.

Renee ended up leaving the church for a long period time in order to reflect upon and process the emotions she felt around finding out those she looked up to were not who they said they were. Her long period away from church is something she regrets doing in retrospect. Yet, at the time was the best decision for her.

Although I believed in God.
And Christ
I just…
I [used to] connect more
with the people [of the church]
[…]
Because I wasn't taught any better.
[…]

And so
when the people started acting

funky,

[…]
when they started showing

they true colors.

[The people of the church were] not
behaving who they were. Like who they *really* are like.

[…]

That turned me off,
like so bad.

It hurt…It hurt…[It hurt]… [It hurt]… [It hurt]… [It hurt]… [It hurt]… [It hurt]
It hurt me a whole lot.

Especially the women.
The women…
leaders
whether they had an official title or not

The women that I looked up to,
just realizing that they were liars and cheaters,

they had this
whole act

[…]
because of that,
I **ultimately just left for a period.**

Eventually, Renee would find her way back to church, but she needed time to heal. She needed time to realize that "people are people" and sometimes people say one thing and do another. None of us are perfect and all people are complex and at times inconsistent. And the church she attended as a teenager did not teach her those lessons. This is something she had to learn on her own.

I don't feel like in that church I was going to,
it was teaching you that,
you know,

people are people.

We don't know that as teenagers or maybe,
depending on how you grew up,
you had to learn that quickly.

That's not what I learned,
[…]
I wasn't taught to depend on guiding the word.
[…]
it's not that I was necessarily taught to
[…]
depend on people,
but I wasn't taught
not to **depend** on people.

After Renee realized that she could not depend on everyone, and that some people are going to be "funky," she vowed to never be a person like that. She decided she would be the kind of leader she *needed* when she was a teenager.

[I realized]
[…]
[some people] gonna be funky or whatever.

So I had to
Realize and understand
[…]
Not [to] take that to heart.
[…]

When I got back into church
and I decided to start serving [and] volunteering.
Especially with like the middle school students,
the high school students to college students,

I **decided** that
I would be the kind of leader
that I **needed** when I was their age…

So being *honest*
[…] *showing up how I show up*
And not really pretending that I have my life together
Or [pretending] to be this great person.
not that I'm a terrible person,
but I'm *not gonna* put on the **front.**

Renee strives to be the leader who she wishes she had when she was younger. So she does her best to be honest, genuine, and authentic with the children and teenagers that she is in community with. Doing so goes a long way for her and helps her to continue to heal that hurt part of her.

Another revelation that Renee came to understand in her adult years is that the pastor sets the tone of the church. Once she realized that, it put things in perspective for her about the importance of living a life consistent with what you say you value. She was troubled by the message sent when pastors lack integrity, implicitly giving the message to the congregation if "the pastor is doing it, I can do it." She feels that if the pastor is not living an honest life, it sets the precedent that congregant members can do the same.

While yes,
people are human,

folks who are in call[ed] positions
[are human][…]

If they're called,
and even if they're not called,

you put yourself in that position,
(claps hands)

you're gonna […]
Be looked at and judged
much harsher.
Then, like […]
the congregation.

Because you're putting yourself
in a position
to be a
mouthpiece for God.

And when you're not doing right,
how do you expect your people to do right?

At the church that Renee is at now, her pastor stresses that he is "human and that [he] makes mistakes." That is why it is important that his congregation "know the word" for themselves. This is something that Renee notes would have been helpful to know in her "younger days" as she was "growing in [her] faith." This is one of the reasons why she pushes for the church to do better with discipleship, because if she knew the word for herself in her younger days, that would have made a big difference for her.

Overall, Renee regrets leaving the church for a long stint of time to navigate the pain she experienced as a teenager. As she grows more into her faith, she is continuously learning how to navigate the tensions that arise with the different personalities of her fellow church members. She also understands now that the pastor sets the tone of the church, but each individual has a personal relationship with God. If the pastor is setting a great example for his flock, this will help the congregation be better people in the long run. The lessons that Renee learned in her early years inform the direction of the faith journey that she is currently on.

Renee's Faith Journey

As she describes it, Renee started building her own relationship with God in 2017. Over the past seven years, she has been constantly trying to grow closer with God. In this section, I share details about when she began her relationship with God, why regularly attending church is important to her, where she is currently in her faith journey, and where she hopes to be in the future.

The Beginnings of Renee's Relationship with God

As I described in the previous section, Renee left the church for a number of years to navigate the pain she experienced as a teenager facing the hypocrisy of women that she thought were role models. In 2017, she started going back to church when she hit rock bottom in her life.

She felt like no one could help her but God. So she "packed up [her] and [her] youngest son and [they] went to church, and [have] been in church" ever since. Since that decision to return to a house of worship, Renee has learned that being in church may help with growing her faith and her relationship with God. Yet ultimately, her "faith and confidence needs to be *in* God."

Why Regularly Attending Church is Important to Renee

For Renee, regularly attending church helps with her maintenance of her faith, and fellowshipping with other Christians. However, she feels that it is up to her to *maintain* her relationship with God.

> My relationship with God is what made me
> Really feel the that I belong [to a church]
> […]
>
> Should I church
> hop,
> wherever I go,
>
> Ima feel like I **belong,**
> because I'm <u>going to church.</u>
> […]
>
> Yes, we need the Community,
> But it's more so
> the Community through Christ
> [Helps us] get stronger
> [In our relationship with God.]
>
> For whatever our God intended plan is.

By attending church a couple times a quarter, and meeting a few times a week with her Kingdom Christian group, Renee feels that she belongs to the community of Christ. And both attending the church and the Kingdom Christian group helps her understand the God-intended plan for her life. Through attending both of these organizations, Renee feels as if she is held accountable in her faith.

[During the time I had left the church],
I did still […]
read the Bible every once in a while.
I prayed every once in a while,

But all of [that] stuff has been **<u>consistent,</u>**
Since I've been back in church.
[…]
[When you're in church]
there's an accountability that happens.

When you're in church
[there's a] **community** […] of folks that actually
check on you
and **care about you.**
[…]
Being in church
just helped me to be,
more accountable <u>to me</u>
and <u>my</u> *spiritual walk*
and [I have] grown in the word […] with God
[Because of it].

Since Renee has been regularly attending church, she is holds herself accountable to maintaining and nurturing her faith, and feels that there are a community of folks who care about her. She no longer feels alone in this world, but feels connected to community. By frequently attending church, she continues to grow her relationship with God, and grow in community with other Christians.

Where Renee is Currently in Her Faith Journey/Relationship with God

Currently, Renee attends a non-denominational mega church in a large city that has virtual options for worship. Even though Renee is "not like 100% in church" as she used to be, she is happy that she has access to church through virtual means. Through attending church virtually, she can still enjoy the service, hear the sermon, and apply scripture to her life, while also taking care of everything else she has going on at home. The fact that the church offers a virtual option just allows her and anyone else to be present in church, even though they cannot be

physically there. Renee deems her current church to be her *home church.* She defines a home church to be "where you plan to permanently worship and serve until you can no longer serve or worship." She feels that this is her home church because the people are kind and welcoming. And, she knows if she needs anything, her church members will help where they can.

In terms of her relationship with God, she considers it to be good, "but it can definitely be better." For example, she talked about how there are times when she does not want to do her devotionals. Yet, she knows she needs to keep at it. For Renee, devotionals are group or individual plans to read and study the Bible. She tries to do these "mostly every day." When she keeps up with her devotionals, she can "really understand and hear" God. This helps with her understanding what she calls "her God-intended plan" for her life, which includes knowing how to be a better Christian. She struggles with this goal of always being a "good" Christian, especially when she feels that based on her experiences, she does not want "to be kind to some people." She is actively working on developing greater forgiveness, generosity, empathy, and compassion in her life.

Where Renee Hopes to Be in Her Faith Journey/Relationship with God

Although Renee's faith and her relationship with God are currently quite solid, as is evident in how thoughtfully she talks about her spiritual journey, she wants to grow deeper in both. She wants a relationship with God where she can hear "him speaking to [her] through Holy Spirit." She believes the Holy Spirit to be:

A guider.

A comforter.

Someone who steps in…

Or not someone
cuz' Holy Spirit […] is Spirit,

but a being that steps in on your behalf
when you don't have […]
words to say
and praise[s] on your behalf.

For her, the Holy Spirit works in tandem with God, and guides her towards her God intended plan. The kind of relationship she wants with the Holy Spirit and God is developed "through biblical study," "prayer, and alone time." Ultimately, she wants to be so in tune and connected with God and the Holy Spirit that she can "permanently lose all of [her] control issues," be able to use her spiritual gifts without nervousness, and be "a good steward over whatever [God] gives" her.

Other than growing deeper in her relationship with God, Renee wants to volunteer and serve more in her home church in the future, and expand her faith-related business. Currently in her business, she creates "various prayer journals, devotion journals, goal journals, and affirmational journals to give women a brave space to open up to who they are." She creates these materials so that her patrons can "connect with themselves, and reconnect or connect with God." In the newer part of her business, she wants to create material around discipleship, which she felt were missing in her early church experiences. Her business mission is one way in which Renee connects her faith work to action for social betterment in the world.

How Renee's Faith Influences and Shapes Her Work in Social Justice

For a few years, Renee has been volunteering in social justice spaces, and just recently begun working for a statewide organization. Renee's grandmother was who got her interested in doing social justice work. It is actually a family affair to do charitable work. Renee is a third-generation volunteer for the organization that she now works for. At one point in time, her grandmother and her current CEO's wife lived in the same neighborhood, and that is how her grandmother got involved in helping others.

The neighborhood that they lived in was predominantly white.

My grandmother had never seen another Black person in that neighborhood,
and so when she saw my CEO's wife,
she was very excited.

And then [my grandmother],
like[d] window stalked
to see the next time she [was] gonna catch
her walking around the neighborhood…

And so that's kind of how they connected.

[Then] my grandmother got involved with the organization.
[…]
then my mom did,
    [then] a couple of my other siblings…
    they got involved years before I got involved.
[…]
Then…One Friday,
My grandmother needed me to fill in for her […]
at the food pantry.

And so I did.

And then I just kept coming back.

Then there was an opportunity for me to work
[With the organization] […]
And so I accepted it
and it just kind of went on from there.

Renee is now works for the same organization where her grandmother, her mother, and some of siblings also volunteered. This statewide organization works on "getting Black folks more involved in all levels of government" by engaging them in voter registration, voter education, civic engagement, and community work and outreach. Some of the duties that Renee carries out for the organization are implementing the Get Out to Vote plan, working on community initiatives for the organization, and managing and training community organizers and fellows.

In the work she does for the organization, there is overlap between her faith and the Black church.

Since the organization she works for focuses on getting Black folks more involved in the electoral process, they strategically host many events at Black churches. These events include voter registration rallies, mental health services and events, and food distribution. By having events at Black churches, this organization gets the host church members to show up as well as the greater Black community. In this case, the Black church becomes a convener and conduit for political education, because it is hosting the event and encouraging its members to become more politically savvy.

When it comes to Renee's faith, she often uses scripture to guide her actions and attitude in the work she does toward social justice. She specifically referred to 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 in our interview. It reads:

> **4** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
>
> **5** It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.
>
> **6** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
>
> **7** It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
>
> **8** Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. (*New International Version,* 2011, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

As Renee maneuvers the tumultuous political climate of North Carolina and the diverse personalities that she works with, she chooses to lead with love. When working with community organizers or other staff, Renee tries not to "hold grudges or keep records of wrongdoing" and aims to "be kind," "gentle," and "patient" as much as she can in her work.

Renee's Advice for those Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

Renee had three pieces of advice to share with those who are currently navigating tensions with the Black church. First, Renee believes that leaving the church altogether is not the best strategy when facing dissatisfaction or disillusionment, especially since there will always be some type of conflict and tension in any Black church. Therefore, she urges folx who have tensions to "church hop until you find a church [that you can] rock with," because at the end of the day, "all churches […] come with something [troubling or problematic] and you just have to ignore it." So, she implores those who have tensions to "really pray over" what they are going through, and let God lead them in their decision.

Second, Renee encourages those who have tensions with someone in their church to ignore, pray, and separate from that person.

> When You find folks that you thought You were
> Cool [with]
> and things go down…
>
> [And] You're not cool with them anymore
> […]
>
> If it's that bad,
> *You can go to another church.*
> If not,
> *Just* *separate.*
>
> Just separate Yourself
> and do whatever it is
> You're supposed to be doing, […]
> to the best of your abilities.
>
> At the end of the day,
> You're gonna be *judged* on **You**
> and not [on]
> what this other person was doing to You.

We control ourselves,
and how we react,
or respond to a situation.

Renee strongly urges those with conflict with someone at their church to not allow that person to taint their faith journey. Instead, they can ignore, pray, and separate from these individuals.

Third, Renee's pushes those with tensions at a church or with someone at their church, to find someone they can talk to about what is going on, "because […] not dealing with is not gonna do anything about it." For that reason, she implores those who are struggling to speak with a minister, or "someone who is ordained" who can mediate the "conflict or confrontation." However, if this is *not* a church they can see themselves being at for long term, she suggests that those folx "just need to hop to another church."

Renee's advice for those who have tensions with the church is to not leave the church altogether. Instead, they should other church services until they find a place where they feel more at home. Also, if a person is having conflicts with someone at a church, there are options for how to address that challenge, including distancing oneself from some people, or finding a clergy member to help them.

Conclusion

As Renee navigated tensions with the Black church, she has come to a place of understanding in her life that she will always have some tension with the church. Presently, in her faith journey, Renee has found her home church, and wants to volunteer and serve more in the near future. Furthermore, she wants to continue to expand her business in creating materials to teach her fellow Christians how they can be better disciples and other Christian essentials. For Renee, her discipleship is essential to her faith journey.

CHAPTER V: I BELONG TO GOD AND NOT THE CHURCH

Jesus is mine.
He's been my fourth man in the fire time after time
Born of His Spirit
Washed in His Blood.
And what He did for me on calvary is more than enough
Oh, I trust in God
My Savior
The one who will never fail
He will never fail

Trust in God by Elevation Worship (2023)

Anna is a Generation X woman living in central North Carolina and uses she/her/hers pronouns. For her portrait, Anna asked to be anonymous, so I have used a pseudonym and I have not included any information that could be used to disclose her identity. For our three virtual interviews together, Anna took them on her laptop in her home. When answering a question, Anna would often look up, down, and give eye contact. Also, whenever her hair was down, she would frequently comb through her hair with her left hand. Moreover, there were several times she would shrug her shoulders and nod her head to create emphasis.

Introduction, Fond Memories, and Belonging to God

In this section, I explore Anna's introduction to the Black church, some of her fondest memories of church, and how she views belonging to God versus the church. At the age of five, Anna was first introduced to the Black church. Since her father was in the military, she recalled that there "tended to be one church that was designated as the 'Black church'" on each military base where her family was stationed. That was the church that her family attended. She shared many vivid memories of the various church trips she went on as a child. One of those memories was her going camping with her church's youth group in Canada, and another was her witnessing a baptism at a river in Europe.

I remember […] being
seven or eight years old
standing on a river bank in Europe,
where they were baptizing in the river.

And I had this
Very **strong**.
Compelling drive to get baptized…
But,
I was so afraid of deep water.

I wouldn't… I wouldn't go.

Had my mother been there,
I probably would have went.
But I just was **so** uncomfortable
And **so** afraid of the *water*.

I wouldn't I wouldn't.

I wouldn't step up to be baptized.

Anna's unique upbringing in attending Black churches overseas has shaped her faith journey, her relationship with God, and her feelings about the church as an institution. For her, she views the church as "an *extension* of [her] relationship with God." Therefore, she feels like she has more of a personal connection to God rather than a deep connection to a Black church or any denomination. The Black church has been an institution for her to grow deeper in her relationship with God. Yet, her faith and relationship with God goes beyond her just attending church. In simple terms, she belongs to *God* more than she belongs to a church.

Belong…

(starts laughing)

I don't know why?
If I still feel like I belong,

…you know?

(long pause)

Yes, I believe in the infallible Word
of God in the Bible,

but yet,
I don't think that
any particular denomination
has it all right.
[…]

I don't think anybody has a patent on God.

So belonging to the church…

[…]

I believe the church is a *part of* the **body** of Christ
But **my** *relationship with* the church
is an *extension of*
My relationship with God.

Because Anna sees herself belonging more to God than an institution, she has no allegiance to a denomination or a specific church. For her, the church is a "system that works together as a whole" in helping her build a deeper relationship with God. However, no matter what tensions she may have with a church, she does not let them interfere with that relationship.

Tensions with the Black Church and Church Hurt

Anna has many tensions with the Black church, primarily regarding what she experiences as the lack of care for mental health among practitioners. As a mental health professional, Anna is bothered greatly by the "hands-off approach to mental health and mental illness" that many Black churches have.

When I talked to lead pastors, […]
They seem to be afraid of some type of…
Litigiousness

And they want to stay away
from mental health
or those who would be providing
any type of mental health support.

I guess they look at it
as in the same way as physical health like,
there are people
who are licensed to practice.

But the church doesn't want to be
associated with that
because they're afraid of
some type of *lawsuit*.

Because of clergy's fear of litigiousness, in her experience, they have ignored Anna's arguments for a mental health ministry in the church. But Anna knows there is a need. She sees "people […] coming into the church walls hurting, looking for answers, looking for support" and the church leadership is not doing much to help with their clear needs.

And…It
(tenses up her face)
Feels...

You know,
in one sense [church leadership] assert[s] the power
of being the ***voice*** <u>of God,</u>

but then,
when it comes to
something that is
this troubling
and disturbing,

not just [in] in [in] in [in] in
the church,

in the outer,
in [the] outer,
greater community,
greater society.

And then,
the Church
doesn't want to <u>approach it,</u>
the Church
doesn't want to <u>touch it.</u>

(nods head several times)

[This] has created tension for me.

This tension frustrates Anna, because she believes that the church should be a place where congregants can come to get their *full selves* healed. According to Anna, "we are three-part beings: spirit, soul, and body."

spiritual man
is at the top of the pyramid.
And that's where most people
are trying to get to their highest level of being.

[Then, the body]

But that soul part,
Our emotions. Our mind. [Our Heartache].
I think a lot of people get caught up there,
Because of […] the human experience,
And life,

The Church just totally
(shakes head) ignores
and dismisses
the soul part of man.

And tends to condemn people
if they're not able to live
according to scripture.

In her words above, Anna explains how she sees the three parts of our beings. She argues that the church should be taking care of all three parts. She is often baffled that church leadership will ignore, condemn, and dismiss parishioners for having trouble navigating life's ups and downs, especially when we all go through struggles and challenges at some point in time. She feels that the church needs to help those who are struggling with heartache, emotional pain, and mental health, and "apply scripture to heal [the] wounds." At the same time, she thinks churches should also have mental health professionals in place to aid congregants in better taking care of their soul. In her experience, the church preaches to the spiritual part, acknowledges the body, and does not do enough for the soul.

We don't spend enough **time**
ministering to the

soul part. […]

We can talk about the body.
"You need to **eat healthy**".
"You need to **go to the doctor**".
"You need to **take care of yourself**".

We can talk about the spirit.
"This is what **You** *should* be doing**;**
if **You're** not doing this,
[…] You're *missing the mark* **spiritually**,

But it's that
SOUL PART,
that I believe **gets** the
least amount of attention in the church

[…]
[People are] just trying to understand
life and situations that happen in life
and still trying to overcome those things
whilst trying to attain […]
the **highest level** of attainment,
which is that spiritual place.

The "we" that Anna is referring to here is church leadership and the church community. For Anna, since Black clergy and members of the church community are lagging with obtaining knowledge on psychology and affective neuroscience, they are doing a disservice to their congregation and the greater community. Anna shared the work of Francis L. Stevens (2021) with me; he sees affective neuroscience as a resource to help "understand the important role emotions play in our mind and behavior" (p. 21). Anna believes that if churches learned about the intersection that emotions has with psychology and behavior, this could assist those who are navigating emotional pain and trauma in themselves. This certainly could have aided her in the church hurt she experienced.

Unfortunately in her 20s, Anna experienced church hurt from her pastor at the time. Hipp et al., (2019) define church hurt to be the "psychological and emotional harm done through the regular sermons and religious rituals" that condemn an individual (p. 889). Anna would add to this definition by stating church hurt is "emotional abuse often […] [inflicted] by […] those in church leadership." These people have "authority and power in the church where they knowingly or unknowingly inflict emotional abuse on congregants." Anna shared her story of that hurt:

> I was really feeling depressed. And I shared that with the pastor at the church that my family and I were attending at the time. […]
>
> [He told me],
> "God told me to stop giving people quick answers.
> So I want to pray about [it] and then I'll get back in touch with you."
>
> So a couple of weeks had passed, and he hadn't followed up with me. So I approached him after church one Sunday, actually in the church parking lot. […]
>
> He basically **condemned me.**
> For not receiving prayer […]
>
> And he said [to me],
> […]
> "If you were where you're supposed to be with God.
> You wouldn't be feeling like this."
> […]
> [This] hurt me to my **core**, […]
>
> I cried. [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.] [I cried.]
>
> I went to my car and cried so badly.
> **For hours**
> *and I knew there's not anything wrong with me.*

As Anna reflected back on this church hurt, she realized that this was the moment in her life that she started to feel tension with the church. Before this happened, she had heard messages "that sounded condemning. But that time it was more direct and it really impacted [her] greatly."

I was like,

"No, No, No….No,
I I I reject that. I reject that."

[…]

"This this is not right
and I know I can't stand for it
and I won't stand for it."

It took much effort for Anna to make sense of this hurt and still find her a way to maintain her relationship to the institution.

Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

Anna regularly attends a Black church which she enjoys going to, yet she has tensions she has to navigate. After Anna sorted through her initial feelings of pain, confusion, frustration, and hurt about what happened between her and her pastor, she then reached out to others for solace and advice. She ended up talking to her husband and another leader in the church, and they both validated her feelings. Yet, she felt like,

It had to be beyond my personal experience
[…]

I had to do more than just how I felt about it…

because this message was being perpetrated…
[in many spaces]
and not just this church.

Even with these thoughts in the back of her mind, Anna and her husband stayed at the church where she had this experience for a little while longer. While they remained at the church, her husband began to look at their "relationship with that particular church and the church leadership […] through a different lens." Eventually, her husband took the initiative and searched for another place of worship for them. And then they left that church. Since this experience, Anna persistently advocates for a mental health ministry in the churches she attends. This is how she

navigates the tensions she faces with the Black church as an institution, and the specific Black churches she attends.

As I shared earlier in this chapter, Anna is bothered greatly by the hands-off approach that the church tends to have around mental health. Nonetheless Anna is persistent in sharing how important it is to attend to the holistic needs of congregants. At each church she regularly attends, she makes it known to church leadership that there is a need for a mental health ministry. Sadly, each church is the same; **"I get a nod. But no follow-up."** Even with this ongoing frustration with the church, Anna finds other ways to place her energy.

I have…
(scratches head)
I have stopped…
But I haven't stopped to say that I won't try again.

I am putting **my energy** in my professional community.
And I'm *using my **voice***

<u>Outside</u> of the church
to talk about
(nods head)
Faith,
(nods head)
Religion,
(nods head)
And **Spirituality**
(nods head)
within the context of **mental health**
(nods head)
And **mental wellness**.

Outside of the church, Anna unites her profession of mental health with her Christian faith. She uses her professional community as avenue to discuss the importance of incorporating mental health in Black church spaces. Every now and again, Anna tries to get involved in her church, "but they don't want me to do what I feel is my skill set," which is helping parishioners with mental health issues. However, she continues to "let people know [she's] available and no one

follows up with [her].” This is definitely an ongoing battle for her, but she is going to keep trying.

> I think,
> if people would
> <u>put their heads together</u>…
>
> **We could** definitely come up with a way
> to <u>provide</u> *mental wellness* or mental health support
> without any concerns.

Eventually, Anna wants to host a mental health conference at her church. The purpose of this conference would be so clergy and the congregation can better understand how a mental health ministry could positively impact them and the greater community. Anna is hopeful that one day church leadership will see and acknowledge the importance of bringing mental health issues and support into the church. Until then, she continues to do what she can in her professional community around mental health and faith.

Anna’s Faith Journey

For Anna in her Christian faith, her salvation is her grounding. Her salvation is accepting Jesus as her savior through the Crucifixion and His resurrection. As she explains,

> I believe in the scripture that says,
>
> That **<u>Jesus is the way,</u>**
> The truth
> and the life
> to be reconciled back to God,
>
> And that Jesus was crucified on the cross for my sins.
> […]
> [Jesus] then transcended to heaven
> and is sitting
> at the right hand of God the Father.
>
> And it was the ***blood*** <u>of Jesus</u> on the cross
> that saved me from an everlasting burning Hell
> […]

And **redeemed me**.

So the salvation is accepting Jesus
as my savior through the Crucifixion and his resurrection.

It was through the Black church where she "gave [her] life to God" and accepted that "Jesus is Christ".

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how Anna feels that she belongs to God rather than to a church or denomination. Her relationship with God is very important to her and is the driving force in her life. For her, she sees "parallels in being a mother, or having children, or being a parent, with God's love for us." She explains,

> I often look to scripture,
> as a **child** of God,
>
> as a **daughter** of God.
> […]
> It helps me understand
> how **God**
> ***sees* Me** and
> God's heart
> toward[s] Me.

Similar to her love for her children, Anna knows God's love for her is everlasting, unconditional, and a constant.

> Throughout the Bible,
> […]
> God shows his love for us
>
> Despite
> **our** behavior
> or
> **our** turning away from Him.
>
> He still **loves us**
> and
> He still **keeps coming** after us

Despite
whatever we may have done,
like my own children,

There's **<u>nothing</u>** that they can do
<u>that can keep me</u> from loving them.

<u>Absolutely nothing.</u>

Something that gives Anna solace is knowing that no matter what she is going through in her life, God's love will forever be present. And He will always have her back. It is God's love and His salvation that keeps her connected to the Black church. However, her faith in God is not tied to a particular denomination and she even mentioned that she was open to worshipping in a church that is not Black.

Even though the Black church is the place where Anna found salvation and gave her life to Christ, she does not subscribe to any denomination.

I don't necessarily subscribe to a particular denomination.
within the Christian faith,

With that being said,
I do *feel* a deep sense of <u>connection</u>
In an **African American church.**
[…]
I didn't grow up in the South…

So I make the distinction between
visiting other churches
where [my family and I] lived,
[And going to churches' where] I have family.

[…]

Within the "Black church",
there is a sense of connectedness
and ***belonging*** that I do feel
[…]

as *opposed to* being in other predominantly,
[…] **white** congregations.

Although Anna feels a deep sense of connection to the Black church, she hopes to eventually worship in a diverse congregation.

I've just grown up in diverse environments
I feel very home in diverse environments

And with regard to
my faith,
church settings,
cultures,
and denominations

I just want…
[…]
As far as
My affiliation or association with church,
whether it be

Black, predominantly white, or whatever.

I really would like for us to
Transcend
race and ethnicity in church

more and more and more and more.

To the point where we,
have the **same experience**
no matter

what predominant ethnic group we're worshipping with.

I know that is a tall order
But (shrugs)
that's my goal for what I would like to see.

Reflecting on what she looks for in a place of worship, Anna has a dynamic understanding of where she might feel most connected and fulfilled. In spite of her feeling a sense of belonging to Black church spaces, she is open to worshipping among diverse congregations.

If the church is following the Bible,
the people […] seem to be authentic
with regard to practicing the Word

[I would be opening to attending]

And really,
It is ***Divine guidance*** for me.

I just don't say,
"Ohh. I passed by this church
and that's the church I wanna go to."

(shakes head)

It's never been like that.
It's been ***Divine guidance.***

I've prayed about it,
and literally something will happen,
and I go to that church
and I have a **profound spiritual experience**
that feels validating and confirming as to
where God *wants* me to be.

[It is ***Divine guidance***]

Ultimately, wherever Anna decides to worship is connected to her being guided by God, which is her Divine guidance. As she continues to grow in her faith, she allows for her Divine guidance to show her where she needs to be.

Exploring her most recent experience, Anna has been attending her current church for the past six years. What she likes about this church is that she was able to safely attend in-person services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I really like the way that [the church],
did the
whole social distancing thing.

We had temperature checks at the door,

And there was a record of
who was at church each Sunday

> If anyone did get COVID,
> [the church] could reach
> back out to [you] and contact people.
> […]
> We were separated
>
> if you weren't within the same family.
>
> Everybody had to wear a mask.
>
> I felt like [the church was] doing their due diligence with regard
> to the whole COVID contamination stuff

Other than being able to safely attend church in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Anna enjoys participating in a daily prayer with her church. These daily prayers that are led by her church assist her with growing her relationship with God and being in community with some of her fellow church members. Discussing her current relationship with God, she describes it as constantly progressing. By regularly going to corporate prayer, she is able to start off her day with God intentionally. It assists her in remaining present when she spends time with God in prayer. Also, it helps in dedicating more of her time to God, which is aiding with growing deeper in their relationship.

Anna wants to continue to grow in her Christian faith, and in her relationship with God. In order to do that, she wants to deepen her understanding of the Bible. She defines apologetics to be, "a discipline within […] theology where [she learns how] to defend the [Christian] faith." She wants to get better at defending her faith to nonbelievers and knowing more about the history of the Bible. Also, she was to be more disciplined in her faith by being more like "God's character." In working on being more like God, she wants to work on "turning away from things that […] are not His character." And foremost, she just wants to be a more devoted disciple of

Christ. For Anna, being a better disciple also entails working for social justice in her everyday life.

How Anna's Faith Influences and Shapes Her Work in Social Justice

Anna began a career in psychology because she saw a need to do something about how the "church was harming people with their approach to people coming to church with psychological and emotional wounds." Currently, she applies her faith professionally by advocating for spirituality to be included in mental health spaces particularly when working with Black Indigenous and People of Color populations. In the future, she would like to "teach and train clergy" so they can assist those who are struggling with their mental health.

For Anna, the "church definitely has a significant place" for her in social justice work. She believes the Black church in the South was the "**core**" of the Civil Rights Movement and is "**foundational** to social and racial justice in the United States [of America] particularly with regard to African Americans."

> The **Black church** has been a vehicle for
>
> *Change* with regard to civil rights laws…
>
> As well as a community
> for *healing* soul wounds.
> […]
> [The **Black church]** was the one place that
> […] allowed [us]
> to gather for worship.
>
> So it was a healing place.
> I can't dismiss
> **The meaning** and
> **The power**
> that the **Black Church** has had [for]
> African Americans
> From the beginning of our enslavement til' current day
>
> It's still a **powerful institution** for change.

Anna shared that the Black church's history in social justice provides her with optimism, especially about what it can do in the future. She acknowledges that even though the church is not a leader today for social justice, she "still identifies with the **roots** of social justice being in the Black church." Those foundational roots of social justice remind her of the **power** of the Black church for African Americans, and how it has been a healing place and vehicle for racial justice for previous generations of Black people. It is her hope that when mental health is openly accepted and a part of the church's ministry, that the institution can be a place for healing soul wounds again. She talked about this very thing in sharing advice to those navigating tensions with the Black church.

Advice for those Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

Prayer and openness to Divine guidance are how Anna navigates her tensions with the church. Moreover, she is a strong advocate for speaking to a head pastor if a person feels an urge to do so. Anna shared the following advice for those navigating tensions with the Black church:

> I would first say, **pray**.
> And see how God leads you…
>
> And if you feel as though […]
> you […] have something to say…
>
> Definitely […] *request an appointment*
> With the **lead pastor.**
>
> I would start at the head.
>
> […]
>
> And if the lead pastor is
>
> Not supportive
>
> or is dismissive.
>
> I would then […]
> Say to the person,
>
> *["It may be time*
> *for you to leave that setting."]*

If prayer and having a conversation with the lead pastor does not work, Anna (like Renee) encourages those with tensions to leave their church. This is something she's had to do.

> If a particular church wounded me so badly
> that I felt like I needed to
> *sever* my membership
> or relationship with that church
>
> I believe I would find another church,
> where I would attend or join with
> just because
> it's an extension of my relationship with God.

Anna trusts that if she needs to leave a church because of church hurt, God will guide her to her next place of worship. It is His Divine guidance that keeps her steady in her faith. Ultimately, her biggest advice to those with tension with the church is to

[Trust God,

earnestly seek God,

wait on God to guide you regarding what to do and how to do it,

and trust Him in the process.

and He will work it out].

Conclusion

Anna has grown frustrated with her church leadership because they will not incorporate a mental health ministry into the church. But since Anna belongs to God and not the church, she firmly believes that she can help the Black church be a healing space again. She may continue to face road blocks, but Anna trusts her faith and her Divine Guidance; both keep her persistent in knowing she will bring mental health services into churches eventually. Like Renee, Anna also believes she will always have tension with the church and her spirituality.

I think that [I] will […]
[have] an ongoing tension
[with my spirituality]
until breath leaves my body,

because the spirit
and the flesh
are constantly at war with one another.

CHAPTER VI: FINDING HIS PLACE OF PEACE

I know that there are times in your life
When the wheels just seem to turn
And uncertainties about your tomorrow seems to grow.
[…]
I am just a prayer away
Call my name with your heart
And I'll hear every word you say.

Just a Prayer Away by Yolanda Adams (1991)

Haikoo is the third participant I interviewed; he is a millennial living in Durham, North Carolina. Haikoo uses he/him/his pronouns. He chose to not be anonymous in this study. Haikoo's skin is a camel brown and his shoulder length locs are black with bleached tips. On his face, he has a black mustache, bleached goatee, and bleached slits in his black bushy eyebrows. In his left nostril, he wears a sliver-hoop nose ring. For our three interviews together, Haikoo took them on his phone sitting on a milky brown comfy sofa with colorful tapestry of the Earth and other planets behind him and his Air Pod Pros in his ears. For the majority of our interviews, he gave eye contact, animatedly used hand gestures, and would often adjust himself in his seat. When Haikoo would break eye contact, he would briefly look up for a few seconds and then give eye contact again. Frequently during his interviews, Haikoo would comb his locs behind his ears and adjust his Air Pod Pros. When he wanted emphasize what a word or a phrase, he would widen his eyes, heighten his voice, and use hand gestures. Also, occasionally throughout our interviews, one of his three cats would walk behind him on the sofa or come up to him demanding attention as we talked. Overall, Haikoo is quite an expressive person and I do my best to capture his personality in this portrait.

Haikoo's Introduction to Black Church: *Being Born on the Pew*

Haikoo was first introduced to the Black church by his parents. Both his parents were deeply involved in church.

> My mother was/is a minister/evangelist,
> and she was like an elder in the church
>
> and my father […] was a minister
> [and] at one point an Assistant Pastor
> and praise and worship leader.

Because his parents were always at church for the various roles they held, Haikoo was too. This is why he refers to his introduction to the Black church as "being born on the pew." Because he was born into it, it would it is natural to think that a person like Haikoo would have a deep sense of belonging to the church. However, as Haikoo says, "belonging and the word 'church' don't really fit for me." The ways he found belonging were not around the "content of church," but around music and the friends he had at church.

Music

Whenever Haikoo spoke about music in church, his face would lighten up, his eyes would widen, and he would move closer to the camera. He gleefully shared with me many of his fond memories of church that were directly tied to music, which made him feel like he belonged in church. One memory that he shared enthusiastically was about shouting music. Shouting music consists of the church's pianist and drummer playing a high tempo song, which encourages congregation members to praise God by jumping up out of their seats, running laps around the building, and shouting praise. Haikoo enjoyed "watching everyone running around like a kid." For him, he emphasizes that "it was just always **fun** because it was just you didn't see people act that way outside of church. So, it was fun to be there and join in and jump around and stuff."

Haikoo reflected on how he became a musician and a singer in church. Looking me directly in the eyes, he shared,

> I started off just like,
> […]
> Any kid that starts
> playing instruments in church.
>
> Like ,You trying to
> hop on the drums
> as soon as church is over,
>
> You know?
>
> You asking for the drummer
> to teach you something
>
> So at one point,
> […]
> I was a drummer for my church.
>
> And then I started,
> I started singing.

Other than the drums, Haikoo also plays the keyboard, bass guitar, and trombone.

Back when he frequently attended church, Haikoo loved being a musician during service. Haikoo felt most welcome at church when he was either singing or playing an instrument.

> I mostly felt like
> **I belonged anytime**
> I was *singing*
> or involved in *drumming*
> […]
> Looking over at the
> keyboardist for instructions
> and throwing up my hand
> for instructions to the bass guitar.
>
> *[I] just [liked]being a part of a team*

Music was and is Haikoo's connective tissue to the Black church. He does not regularly attend church anymore but will attend a New Years' service when one of his friend's is singing.

For Haikoo, he does not have to be present in a physical building to listen to gospel music, which in turn reminds him of his most positive feelings from attending church. He can worship in his own ways and worship at home. Haikoo proudly told me, "I still listen to gospel music **heavily** whenever I feel like it and I will have my own church here." Even though Haikoo does not regularly attend church anymore, the music of church is very much a part of him.

Spending Time with Friends

Other than when he was playing music, Haikoo felt like he most belonged to church when he was spending time with his friends outside of it.

> I feel like, […], maybe the times outside of church when I was hanging with like, some of the other kids. […] Yeah. Like going to other people's houses and like that were in that church community and having, like, sleepovers and acting like we were on (shakes head) WWE Raw. And you know, like play fighting to the point where one of us got mad and we started fighting for real. And then we was cool two hours later. Later, like (adjusts himself in his seat and moves closer to the camera) those were the most like belonging times.

When Haikoo spent time with his friends from church, he felt the most natural. He felt like a kid, who had a "normal" childhood that was not tied to being in church 24/7. For Haikoo, music and spending time with his friends was when he felt like he most belonged to a Black church.

It just gave [me] something to look forward to.
It's like a glimmer of light in the darkness.

Haikoo's Tensions, and Trauma with the Black Church

Since childhood, Haikoo has had a growing tension with the Black church, something he still lives with today. While experiencing tension, Haikoo also experienced spiritual trauma and church hurt in the Black churches he attended.

Haikoo's Tensions with the Church

From a young age Haikoo developed a growing tension with the Black church because he asked a lot of questions that were often not welcomed. Things did not make sense to him.

> I felt like I had a lot of questions about the Bible and the things that were being taught from a young age. I was extremely kind of like discerning and didn't always know what that was and thought maybe I was just disrespectful or couldn't stop asking questions…
>
> *Things didn't make sense,*
> *things didn't add up*
> *and I didn't feel like with the ideas that I had*
> *and the things that I wanted to do*
> *and the way that I expressed myself*
> *[that] I really ever belonged there.*

Haikoo's tension with the church would only grow stronger when he entered adulthood and started attending a church while in college.

> I was praise and worship leading my sophomore year of undergrad at ECU. And, I'll say it was about maybe like a year that before things started to get a get really, really tense for me. And, I started noticing the, I mean already noticed it and it was a reservation of mine already, but I started really getting entangled into the corporate nature that that has taken over the church and the money hungry nature […] and some of the ideologies that were being preached.

Haikoo describes the corporate nature of church when "a church […] has lost the heart for people and gained a love for money, […] and will use people to get that money. [Also a church] will use people to bring other people into the church" to get more money. According to Haikoo, when a church is operating in a corporate nature, **money** is the only thing that matters.

And everything,

[and] every thought process is like,

you know, "it takes money to run the church."

When Haikoo began to realize the corporate nature of the church he was attending, he started to notice the money-making schemes of the pastor.

> There started being like this this doctrine preached like over and over about debit and credit accounts mentioned in the book of Paul or something like that, or in (squints eyes) **reference to Paul. And that wasn't really what this scripture said**, but it was being used […] for [what] the pastor [needed] at the time. Umm to say you're supposed to open a debit and a credit account with me. So you support me financially and I give you the word and I labor over the word.

I kinda side eyed that a lot.

> And then, you know, you add on to that, it became this thing called the "Lions chest" or chest or whatever where […] you had to walk up where everybody could see you. […] [Y]ou know, during offering time and put money into his chest as well as into the church.

I felt like [the pastor] shamed some people into going up there,

Putting money in [the chest]

Another money-making scheme that the pastor used was convincing Haikoo to invite other college students to church and using the music played during service as an enticement. Once Haikoo brought his fellow college students to church, the pastor would eventually manipulate the students into giving "the church" their student loan refund checks. In addition, as a musician, Haikoo observed how the pastor would use music to stir up people's emotions.

What I came to understand is…

the praise and worship is for the congregation, right?

[And] the musicians are for the pastor.

If you notice, a lot of pastors cannot […] "delivery word" or they can't preach without music. They don't sound as powerful without music. They need it to get people's emotions stirred up because music is that powerful. So, they're willing to pay for their own, to pay musicians for their own gain.

The pastor understood the value of music, which he showed could literally play on the heart strings of his congregation. As Haikoo experienced it, the pastor paid his church's musicians, so he could reap offering and tithes from his congregation for his own benefit.

Haikoo described several money hungry schemes that the pastor used to manipulate his congregation to give him donations, which caused Haikoo to have a growing tension with the pastor. Haikoo witnessed many of his friends, who had families, and who had trouble paying for their light bills and just "struggling" to make ends meet, feel guilted into donating what little they did have.

But they feel brainwashed
enough to like,

put their money into

this man.

Not even just the ministry, but the man. And this man is not giving back to anybody. And it was like, that's the general nature of (shrugs shoulders) corporate church.

Haikoo's Church Hurt

Through the majority of the time that Haikoo attended church, which was from infancy to about the age of 21, he experienced "church hurt." As I have mentioned previously, Hipp et al. (2019) define church hurt to be the "psychological and emotional harm done through the regular

sermons and religious rituals" that condemn an individual (p. 889). Haikoo's church hurt looked like public shaming, threats of going to Hell, favoritism, spreading of rumors, and manipulation. Haikoo described the church hurt to be "slave master tactics," which he describes as being:

> This person or certain group of people that are closer to God. And they receive these messages and they tell you what to do.
>
> *To the point where you don't even have a mind of your own.*
>
> *And then they become abusive even.*
>
> While there weren't whips and things like that…It's like
>
> *"we're gonna use*
> *fear and public shaming to get you in line."*
>
> *[Or] fear of you losing whatever your position is.*
>
> *Or sitting you down.*
>
> *Or being yelled at in the middle*
> *of a sermon in front of everybody.*
> *[Or] […] expos[ing] [you].*
>
> *[Or starting rumors] about you.*
>
> *"Don't get out of line*
> *because […] the abuse will come."*
>
> *The lashings will happen.*
>
> "I am the true prophet of God."
> "this is the only church that's doing it right."
> "when I speak, […] y'all believe it."
> "And you don't question me."
>
> **Do not question.**

One significant incident of "church hurt" that Haikoo recalled was when his father was publicly shamed and humiliated in the middle of a service. Haikoo's dad was "very strong-willed and did not always go along with the program at church." He was the praise leader in church and "a vocal leader people often listened to." The pastor did not like that.

Oftentimes the Pastor would look
for ways to *humble*
[my dad],
usually behind-the-scenes.

[My dad] would *encourage* people
under his leadership (as minister music),
to ***go against [the pastor]***
and form mutinies.

We found out later that [the pastor] threatened,
that if [congregants] **did not follow** his words,
they would fall out of favor with him,
and **God** would be
displeased
and punish them.

This strategy […] was often *effective*,
[…]
Many of the members of the music team,
Decided to tell my father,
"*I don't want to work with you anymore."*
[And stepped away from the music team]

[This was all]
At the direction of a brainwashing pastor.

Instead of fighting it,
my father
stepped
down [from the music ministry].

The following Saturday
during church service,
My father *still played* the guitar
although he was not the praise worship leader anymore.

He was visibly *quiet*
and less expressive.

He was not himself.

It seemed that a sadness was over him.

That's when **the pastor** started to
humble him openly,
and *with* **an audience**.

In the middle of a sermon.
The Pastor [said]

"What's wrong with you, brother?
You used to be able to take it and you can't take it no more."

Literal words.
Microphone in front of the whole church.
It was wild.

> I remember that being a young child and my father sat there and he was not a crier. He was the one that beat me for crying, but he sat there and cried in front of the whole church. He didn't storm out. He didn't […] stand up for himself. He just like, sat with [his] guitar and leaned over and cried.

I watched
I watched
[I watched]
[I watched]
[I watched]

my father,
be *hurt* **A LOT** at that church.

Through this public action of shaming, the pastor was inferring that Haikoo's father was "unfaithful and must have sinned some kind of way, for God to be breaking him like this." By making an example of Haikoo's father, the pastor showed to his congregants that this is what happens if they ever go against him.

[Don't
ever
question the pastor
or their will be consequences.]

Despite experiencing church hurt, Haikoo also participated in it. For example, while in college, Haikoo condemned his friend for being gay, which is a message he learned in church.

Um so you know, like
I was in undergrad,
like, really doing a lot of the same things that that undergrads do.

But looking down on people for certain things that I was taught was wrong.
I remember I had a friend come out to me as gay.
[My] sophomore year
and […] we had roomed together…
and everything
and things got *weird*…

I treated him differently

I alienated him

because it was like…
(points finger) "You know, better"
(points finger) "You know where this leads."
"You know, God doesn't approve of this."
"It's an abomination"
"You know where'd you go."
"I can't be a part of this."

I was really cold but not outwardly mean.

I mean…
(plays with locs)
I was doing every sin I could out there
(giggles)
So you know *had no right.*

To this day, Haikoo regrets how he treated his friend in college. Fortunately, he and his friend are still close and were able to move past this ordeal in college.

Throughout childhood to college, Haikoo experienced tensions with the churches he attended. In college, he experienced tensions with the church and tensions with the pastor over the corporate nature of the church. As Haikoo navigated tensions with the church and his pastor, he also suffered church hurt. In the next section, I share how Haikoo navigated these tensions and trauma.

How Haikoo Navigated Tensions with the Black Church

Haikoo navigated his tensions with the church and his pastor in a multitude of ways. These ways were: (1) He a found a tribe at church, (2) He used music to distract him from the tensions he felt, (3) He settled and focused on his faith, (4) He met with the pastor to talk through his tensions (5) and eventually, he started divesting from his church responsibilities, and ultimately, left the church.

By having a tribe (a group of friends) at church, Haikoo had something to look forward to when he attended church; at least he could see his friends.

I found safe spaces in other people.

Um, you know, not many at the church,
But there were a couple of people that I found
that thought the way I did,

and I was able to speak with [them] about that.
So I utilize[ed] my tribe.
Because we're not meant to do it alone…
you know?

His friends and music were his saving grace from the tensions and trauma he experienced at church.

You know the cliche?
I hate it here,
but
(gestures with left hand and arm)
there's my friend[s]
(gestures with right hand and arm)
and there's my music.

In college, Haikoo used being a part of the church's music ministry as a distraction from the tensions he felt about the Black church as an institution. Music became his place of peace.

So I became like
the vocal coordinator.

I was leading
a lot of songs.

And I kinda like
threw myself into the
music ministry and
and I said to myself,

"Yo, like find your
place of peace.
You're not gonna
agree with everything."

And that was kind of like my coping strategy…

"You're hearing some things that you don't like,
but this is better than what you were getting into,
you know…
allowing other people to influence you,
So just stay here and find peace with it."

Like.
(shrugs shoulders)
And so it was really settling.
That was the initial coping strategy for me […]
to settle.

For a period of time, Haikoo decided to settle and ignore the tensions he felt about the church and his pastor. During this time, he focused deeply on his faith as his reason for returning to the church regularly.

I've been in in church situations where everything didn't work for me.
And […] I had some major problems with what was going on.

But while I was still a Christian,

I knew that church was instrumental in me getting maintenance every week.
You know with my beliefs and […] my faith.

So I had to find my place of peace.

"OK, they're begging for money every weekend…

This is really toxic."

"They're manipulating people [every week]….
They're mistreating people every week….
This is really toxic."
But one thing that doesn't change is the Bible.

So even if I hear a word.
And they're trying to misconstrue [it],
there's gonna be some kind of truth in there,

and there's gonna be something that I need.

I'm gonna be able to go there
and get music.
I'm gonna be able to go there
and dance
and praise God.

Like, regardless of what other people are doing
or what is going on…
This is my place of peace.

Let me stop worrying about other
people.

Let me stop worrying about
the pastor
doing things that are wrong,
because the pastor
is just a man
like everybody else.

They're human beings,
and they're gonna make errors.

[I'm] gonna find my place of peace!
I'm not giving in.

Eventually, Haikoo got to a point that he could no longer ignore the tensions he felt. So, he decided to set up a meeting with his pastor to talk through everything he was feeling.

[I'll] never forget…

we went out to Longhorn,

and I asked him about this

debit and credit thing.

I asked him about a lot of things
that that he preached…

and it was a lot of it was in regards to money

[…] cuz he kept preaching on it.

It would just permeate the whole service.

MONEY MONEY **MONEY** MONEY **MONEY** MONEY **MONEY** MONEY **MONEY**

[…] he gave me a lot of roundabout answers,
[…]his radar was already up.

I kind of tricked him a little bit.

Not because I made statements
or said anything was wrong,

but because I asked questions
that like made it hard for him to explain.

And he knew I was seeing through it.
I could tell,

But *we ended*,

There was <u>no argument or anything</u>.

We ended the lunch nicely.
He paid.

And I'm like,

"we should be good…

But then in one way or another…right?
Persecution, as they call it […]
began to really […] rear its head."

Sadly, the lunch Haikoo had with his pastor did not solve any of his problems; it only made matters worse. He began to get ostracized and gas lit by the pastor, his wife, and many of his praise team members. Ultimately, Haikoo decided to step down from his church responsibilities.

Yet, he still attended church.

I really just felt

broken
down
and defeated.

I had, you know,

stopped doing
praise and worship.

And I was just coming to visit.

Like. And I don't know if that was because I felt like it was the right thing to do,
Or if I felt like it was something that stabilized […] me from spiraling into…

You know?

Stabilize me from spiraling into something else.

I just was like,

"I'm gonna still
(widens eyes)
try to go to church."

And honestly,

it was probably the looming
(shakes head)
fear of hell
(chuckles)
[that kept me there].

Eventually, Haikoo got to the point that he could no longer attended this church. After this last church experience, Haikoo visited one other church. However, that church was quite similar to the other churches he attended; it similarly was deeply focused on money and had a corporate nature about it. Haikoo has yet to regularly attend a church since.

Haikoo did his best with navigating the tensions he felt with his church and his pastor by making friends, being a part of the church's music ministry, trying to focus on his faith as an

anchor, and meeting with the pastor to talk through his tensions. Yet, he eventually got to his breaking point and decided his peace was more important than staying a part of the church he was attending at the time. Leaving the church did not mean he left his faith, however.

Haikoo's Faith Journey Since Leaving Church

Since leaving the church for now (and perhaps for good), Haikoo's faith journey has been quite rewarding and enriching for him. His spirituality and relationship with God, who he refers to as Sky Daddy is continuously growing, he feels free in his faith, and no longer lives in fear of going to Hell. Also, Haikoo has developed several spiritual practices that keep him grounded.

Haikoo's Faith

Haikoo no longer sees himself as a Christian. However, he does "follow some Christ like principles." And he believes the core of every religion is the same.

> For the most part,
>
> *these religions,*
> they **have a lot of the same allegories**,
> they have the **same principles** in all of these things.
> But then the difference might be…
>
> *We don't wear pants*
> *Or we don't eat shellfish,*
> *Or we worship on this day*
> *Or we worship God this way.*
>
> You know what I mean?
>
> […] it's the same principles.
>
> So I feel like, you know, at the core of every religion, if I wanna find something good. Um what's supposed to be presented in person is something good. Like even if it's being misrepresented or misused.

Because Haikoo sees truth in every religion, he sees God in everything around him, including himself.

I am God.

And so are You. [And You.] [And You.]

And so is everything that I see around me.

The way that I've come to understand is…
loving God
is loving yourself,
is loving others,
because it's all one consciousness.
[…]
so I mean I will have worships
where I will listen to like a song
that maybe say,
"Be still and know that I'm God"

and that takes on his own meaning.

And that's why my relationship with
God/me/universe
is so important…
Because to me that means like,
"Yo, when everything is getting hectic;
remember who you are."

So I'm literally telling myself,
*"Be still and know that **I am God.**"*
[…]
*"Be still and know that **I am God.**"*

And that's enough.

Since Haikoo believes God is in everything, he believes that everyone and everything is interconnected and intertwined. Therefore, he does his best to treat everyone (including himself) kindly and with deep compassion. With his faith in believing that everything and everyone is God, he feels free and no longer fears going to Hell.

I'm <u>not running in fear</u> *of Sky Daddy.*

Like ready to strike me

down

at any moment

Or mad at me,

or ruining my life,

or ready to send me to hell.

You know, *it's free…*

[…]

I don't think that most Christians would be Christians if Hell was not present.
Hell is like the key component to Christianity.
Because what other reason do you have to "live right"
And be this rigid in your practice.
Like, if you're not scared or something.
[…]
And I don't think [that's] just Christianity.
But I can only speak for,
you know,
the major thing that I've experienced empirically.

So yeah, […] it's less fear.
It's more freedom in and saying,
"Yo, I messed up."
Or if I fall […] off of practice like, which happen[s] occasionally because I'm human.
Life happens.

Sometimes […] you go for a period of time where you like,
"I can't meditate. I'm too depressed."

You know?
[…]
And instead of getting down on ourselves saying,

"You're falling off a practice"

or

"Your faith is weak"

and all of these things.

It's like,
"No!
This is going to happen."

And if you can't right now… that is OK.

[…]

I can give myself more grace

God's unconditional love does not depend on how perfectly I'm carrying out everything.

And **I am God.**

I'm going to love myself unconditionally. *[I will give myself more grace]*
I can't beat myself up for that or act like I'm any less than.

So yeah, it allows me to make mistakes,
[…]
It allows me to be more compassionate and less judgmental,
[…]
It allows me to live a more a freer life.

Because Haikoo follows no one religion, finds truth in all religions, and sees himself and others as God, he has come up with his own set of spiritual practices that make sense to him and ground him in his faith.

Haikoo's Spiritual Practices

Daily, Haikoo tries to do affirmations and morning mediations upon waking up. He likes to do these before "anything else," because they set the tone for his day. He intentionally sets earlier alarms than he needs to, so he can *ease* into his day and practice mindfulness. Haikoo defines mindfulness as "mediation in motion" and "taking the time to focus on the things that are going on in that present moment." As he notes, mindfulness is about "being present."

So
(makes a motion as if he his brushing his teeth)
If I'm brushing my teeth,
I'm focusing on how like the *bristles feel*
Against my gums
And against my teeth.
And like how I'm feeling *<u>everything</u>* […]
Foaming up
And how *cleansing* that feels.

Or

how […] drop[s] […] from the shower
like *feel*
(touches his chest with his right hand)
Hitting my skin.

[…]

"what am I?

What am I smelling?"

Even if unpleasant.

"What am I?

What am I seeing?
What am I feeling?"

[…]

What does this taste like?

What does the air taste like around me?"

[…]

Just kind […] of taking the time to

breathe that in
Instead of you know,

What's next on my list???
I have to get ready,
and hear everything,
[and do everything,]
and get to work,
[…]
Let me complete this list
and go through [EVERY] motion.

[NO!]

Like just tak[e] the time to almost **enjoy it.**

As part of Haikoo's practice of mindfulness, he is conscientious about what he listens to in the morning.

I don't get up in the morning listening to

heart break music,
which I
(puts his hand on his chest)
love.

Or things that are Or things that are

sad,

super toxic.

I'm up listening to
things that are going to

set the tone

For my day

Other than affirmations, mediations, and mindfulness practices, Haikoo also participates in Reiki, sound baths, prays, and thanks his ancestors in his spiritual rituals.

Since leaving the church, Haikoo's faith consists of practicing and honoring some Christian-like principles, as well as the exploring and engaging the teachings of many other religions. He believes God is in everything and everyone, and that everything is intertwined and interconnected. His current faith practices, and his upbringing in the Black church, both connect to his work for social justice.

How Does Haikoo's Faith Influence and Shape his Work in Social Justice

From his years in college until today, Haikoo's upbringing in the Black church and his current faith practices have shaped and influenced how he carries himself in social justice spaces. In this section, I share aspects of Haikoo's social justice involvement, and then illustrate how the Black church and his faith have influenced his social justice work.

Haikoo's Social Justice Work

During Haikoo's undergraduate years, he began participating in social justice work. When 17-year old Trayvon Martin was killed in Miami Gardens, Florida in February 2012, Haikoo discovered his passion in social justice. This high-profile murder led him to start an organization with some other students on campus called "In Just Us." However, it was not until George Floyd was killed by a white police officer in May 2020 when Haikoo started frequently attending protests and getting more directly involved in activism. Through the many protests that he attended, he met other activists and organizers, and eventually ended up travelling to Graham,

North Carolina (Alamance County), and "from there on, it was just like […] history wrote itself." In Graham, Haikoo became more aware of his passion for community and helping those who are disenfranchised. Moreover, he learned about the specific skills he could bring to the movement work there.

> I never wanted to be up in front of anything. I didn't want to make speeches. But it's like I joined, […], an organization or two and then they started hearing how I would speak at meetings when formulating ideas or just […] boosting morale.
>
> And then it was like,
>
> *"Yo, we think you would do good [with] making speeches.*
> *[...]*
> *"We think you're great for talking*
> *to the news and things like that*
> *because you,*
> *articulate well,*
> *and all of these things."*
>
> And [I was] like,
> " Oh, oh."
> (chuckles)

From a simple ask at a meeting, Haikoo began to lead public relations work for several social justice organizations in the county.

> I was (shakes his head back and forth) the one that was often nominated to do speeches, to speak to the news. […] And that job put my face out there **a lot.** […] A few years back, I was kind of…
>
> I wouldn't say the leader of anything
> […]
> I wasn't the spearhead or the brains behind everything.
>
> I was really just a **representative**
> and I was one of the major faces of
> (moves closer to camera)
> that movement.
>
> So yeah, like a mouthpiece, I guess.
> **I'm the spokesman.**
>
> I'm the one that gives us a **collective voice** that the world can understand.

Even though Haikoo was quite gifted in being the public relations person for so many organizations in Alamance County, it got to a point where he removed himself from that front-facing work because many stressful things began happening to him.

> [Since] my face was out there and all of these things, […] a lot of crazy things [started] happening to me…
>
> **Death threats,**
>
> **Being followed home,**
>
> **People doxing me,**
>
> **Getting beat down by the cops**
>
> **And getting pepper sprayed in the face**
>
> (shake his head)
> **All types of things.**

Because of the challenges that Haikoo faced as a visible activist in Alamance County, he developed a lot of trauma. Therefore, he is no longer doing much front-facing work. Instead, he strives to create spaces to facilitate healing for those like him, who have experienced trauma while in social justice spaces, including the church.

> I started sensing a <u>need</u>
> And [I] start[ed] seeing a lot of people with traumas.
> […]
>
> I [was] like,
>
> *"Yo, you should try taking some time to like to be mindful, or to be still.*
>
> *Like what are you doing to pour into yourself?"*
>
> I mean a lot of us in the Black community, is like,
>
> *"I mean I don't do that,"*
>
> *"I don't have time for that,"*
>
> *"You know, I'm so busy."*

And [I'm] like,

*"Yo, can you **make** some time."*

And [they're] like,

"I don't even know how to meditate."

And I'm like,
"There's no wrong way."

But in people's minds,
they think they have to be,
or they may need like guidance with that.

So [I'm] like,
"Look,
I meditate all the time.
How about like, you know,
You just come meditate with me.
Like I got you."

So it kinda just started cuz' I just started like sensing a need.
Um for the people around me.

Haikoo started this practice about two years ago and leads all mediations from his home in Durham. For him, his present social justice work is all about "getting people to sit still," healing the trauma he experienced while helping others to do the same, and fulfilling a need in the social justice community.

I created like a sanctuary in my home. So […] a lot of people come here and even like barter the meditation rate.

They come here and easily want to go to sleep.

And I used to think like,

"[Am] I boring people that bad???"

but like, no,
it's just like they want to sleep.

And they usually

don't wanna leave.

[…] It's like they [like] the ambience
and the energy that I keep *flowing* in here.

[…]
I try to make my space meditative.
Even outside of just doing guided meditations.

It all started with just me helping or wanting,
you know,
to help people that **I love.**
Or that I saw really going through it and not pouring into themselves.

Other than leading mediations and other mindfulness sessions based on the need of those around him, Haikoo also mentors Black kids in his community, works with the Black Self-Defense team, and is part of a Black Panther organization called Pan SOC.

I worked with the **Black Self-Defense team**,
which is basically […]
a coalition. […]

We teach people about their rights, […]
gun laws, [and]
how not to get caught up with gun charges.
De-escalation especially.
[We] do community events, […]
We also do security um for predominantly Black events,
where they […] need security and stuff.

And then, I'm part of a
Black Panther organization called Pan SOC,
which is Panther's operative specialist command.

As is evident in his reflections, much of Haikoo's present social justice work is infused with his current spiritual practices and rituals. At the same time, his upbringing in the Black church has influenced some parts of his social justice work.

How the Black Church has Influenced Haikoo's Social Justice Work

Haikoo may not regularly attend church anymore, but his upbringing in church heavily influences a lot of his work in social justice. Since he sang often in church from childhood to adulthood, Haikoo built up his confidence for public speaking.

I think growing up and having to be in front of the church, […] I think it kind of built the confidence in me when speaking to people because I was always like singing in front of them. […] Having to, you know, to sometimes talk in between songs doing like praise and worship and all of that.

So that kind of made an ease of transition when it came to being up in front of people.

So, I mean, church gave me something good.

In addition to building up his confidence for public speaking, Haikoo also learned positive traits from the pastors and praise and worship leaders he watched over the years.

Then knowing how […] to *utilize* your **charisma** to really move the people that you're interacting with and speaking to,
I think that kind of came innately from, […]
[Me] watching preachers in church,
Me, watching other praise and worship leaders,
Me watching people that got up to do anything in church just about,
And me doing it.
[…]
It really helped with speeches.
It helped me learn to piece my words together.
You know.
[…]
[To use] my vast vocabulary,
[…] and just in tonality.
(moves his head to provide emphasize)
Where to ***strike***,
[and] where [to] *quiet back down.*

As Haikoo stated, the "church gave him something good" in building his confidence in public speaking and teaching him communication skills that he uses often in social justice spaces. Haikoo may not be public speaking as much as he was a few years ago, yet, his spirituality and faith nonetheless influences the mediations he leads to heal the Black folx he comes into contact with and to heal himself. There is much we can learn from Haikoo about how to maintain faith even amid struggles with the church.

Haikoo's Advice for those Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

During our last interview together, Haikoo shared two pieces of advice for those navigating tensions with the Black church. First, he encourages folx to stay with the church, but only if that helps them be the best version of themselves.

> I've encouraged people to *stay in* their **churches**
> because at the end of the day,
> *if* that's what makes You
> the **best version of yourself,**
> and that what's *keeping* **You**
> from going the *suicidal* route,
> or for going out here,
> **hurting people or whatever,**
> *and* it is **maintaining that strong faith.**
>
> Like, **don't let** the *little things*
> that happen in that church *sway* **You**.
>
> Like stay at your church until
> you feel like it's not what you need.

Haikoo's second piece of advice is for folx to do what they need to do to *find their place of peace.*

> If that looks like no longer being in that church,
> And you really soul searched
> And that's the right decision for you.
> Then **leave!**
> You don't have to explain yourself to anybody.
>
> But if your place of peace,
> is Christianity
> […]
> [Or] sticking to this church lifestyle
> is what makes [you] a better person.
>
> Then like you know,
> […] find [another church]
> or stay there
> Stay there and take the good with the bad.

For Haikoo, he wants those navigating tensions with the Black church to *do what is best for them* and *find their place of peace.* If the church someone is currently attending is no longer helping them grow in their faith, then he suggests they leave. They should go to another church or find another space that serves them.

Do what is best for you.
Find your place of peace.

Conclusion

Haikoo no longer attends the church and does not consider himself a Christian. In his current faith practice, he sees truth in all religions, and regularly practices and leads mindfulness activities and mediation. Even though, Haikoo does not identify as a Christian, he still feels connected to the Black church.

I'm still gonna be churchy
in all git out.
[…]
I could turn that on and off.
Just like all the rest of them do.

But like that is
a part of Black culture.
[…]
That never leaves

The Black church will always be a part of Haikoo. Yet, he has found peace elsewhere. And in this peace, he can fully be human.

CHAPTER VII: SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND HIS FAITH TO TEACH OTHERS

The preacher isn't God
Religion's first mistake
[…]

Can you believe?
I'm losing my religion
Thank God
Helping you lose yours
Is my job

Losing My Religion by Kirk Franklin (2016)

Rev. Adon is the last participant I interviewed; he is a millennial living in Smithfield, North Carolina and chose to not be anonymous in this study. Rev. Adon identifies as being non-binary and uses he/him/his and they/them/their pronouns. They are comfortable with their masculine/cis presentation, yet see themselves to be a spirit first. His being is non-binary, but their human experience is as a Black man. His skin is sienna brown and his dark black locs fall down to the middle of his back. On his face, he has a black mustache and a thick patch of black hair on his chin, with two manicured black eyebrows. In his left nostril, he wears a gold-hoop nose ring. Rev. Adon participated in his three interviews in his home office using a laptop. Behind them was a four-tier white shelf of books with a colorful illuminated Black power fist on the second to top shelf. To the left of the shelf was a wall of posters of quotes and an American flag in Pan African colors, red, black, and green. There were a few times during his interviews that I could hear his baby boy playing in the background. Rev. Adon was very intentional with using pauses as they spoke. Often to create emphasis, he would shake or nod his head, and use hand gestures when speaking. For the majority of our interviews, they gave eye contact, and would only break eye-contact when answering a question.

Rev. Adon's Introduction to Black Church

At around 11 years old, Rev. Adon was first introduced to the Black church by their grandmother. At that time when they went to church, it "always used to feel like a big family reunion." He has many joyful and fond memories of church then regarding music, the food, and playing with the other children. For them, the music was "always good," and they could not "help but to like, clap or wanna stomp your feet."

[**The church**] *always* <u>supported</u> me in
dancing and *running*.

I know this sounds horrible…
(chuckles)

but like,
I used to remember
being able to just go **<u>CRAZY</u>**

and everybody thought that that was great
and that was the only place I [could] do that.

I [could] just run
around
freely with a <u>tambourine</u> jumping UP
and down, right?
[…]
Like that was OK.
I could do that there
and not be seen as a bad kid.

If anything,
I was seen as a good kid for doing that, right?

Another fond memory of church from his childhood was the "food at the end of service." He "always looked forward to that."

It was *so much* **<u>soul food.</u>**

It was soul food
before I knew
that's what it was called.

[…]

I think soul food probably was created
in the church.

That's why it's called
SOUL FOOD, *right?*
From the Mac and cheese,
to the fried chicken
to the, you know, all the things I don't eat anymore.
(laughs)
The pork.

*But **it was so good!***

Oh, my God!
It was *so good* and
I'm glad I experienced it
when I did. (chuckles)

They also enjoyed going to children's Sunday school, "where [they] could be with [the] other Black children."

There was a lot of joy.
[A lot of joy.]

Despite having so much joy and fond memories in church, Rev. Adon never felt like he belonged. The only way he felt like he belonged was by putting on a "mask" and trying to blend in with everyone.

I feel like how I always *wanted* to truly be
and how […] I *[tried]* to show
who I really am,

I was always kind of like,
(squints eyes while looking up)

ridiculed
or condemned
or rebuked.

[This is] the language,
[…] that [those in the church] gave me.

I couldn't truly ask
the questions that I wanted to ask.

I couldn't actually show up
and show up with my multifaceted ways…

[…]

I only really felt like I belonged,
if I was to **mask**, or
Try to **blend in** with everyone else.

By being his multifaceted self, Rev. Adon was ridiculed, condemned, and rebuked in church. In order for him to be accepted by those around him, he masked and covered the parts of him that made him unique, like his inquisitiveness.

Rev. Adon's Tensions with the Black Church and Christianity

Beginning in childhood and running throughout his life, Rev. Adon had many tensions with the Black church, Christianity, and pastors at the churches he attended. To give justice to the various tensions that Rev. Adon has experienced while being a part of Black Christian spaces, I divide this section into two parts. The first is about Rev. Adon's tensions with the Black church and Christianity, and the second part is about Rev. Adon's tensions that they faced at the last church they attended.

As a child, Rev. Adon was naturally inquisitive. He "used to ask a bunch of questions […] trying to figure out the theology and the stories" that were told in church. For him "church didn't get bad until" he became a preteen. During his preteen years, the hypocrisy of church "became more prevalent" and he "started to see" how the Black Christian faith was problematic.

I remember when
I was like eight or nine.
Even younger than that, right.

I'm like, *"Why is God white?*

I remember asking that question
[…]
And they're like,

"Well, God doesn't really have a color."

I'm like, *"OK, then why is Jesus white?*
Like, is Jesus <u>really</u> white?"

And you know, they didn't answer my question.

They're like
(shakes his head)
"Don't ask.
Don't ask those kinds of questions.
It's not about that."

And then I remember being
Like around 11…12
and I'm in a different Black church,
and I'm asking the same questions

"Why is?
Why do they make Jesus, white?"

And then of course,
at that time
I was reading more…
I was reading the Bible

And I said,
"It says [in the Bible]
[Jesus] has skin of olive or the skin of bronze, right?
[…]
Skin of olive. Skin of bronze…
That's not Peach.
That's not pale, right?
*That's a **brown** color… Hair of **wool**.*
(Shakes his locs)
*That's **curly**. **Kinky**.*
Like, what's [this] long, flowy, straight hair.
Like this, <u>doesn't make sense.</u>"
[…]
*"Why does it seem like **everything** that is fun is a sin?*
*Like everything I wanna do is **wrong**.*
*Like [that] **<u>doesn't make sense."</u>***

Those [were the] kind of […] questions
that I was asking.

And they weren't liking that a lot.
They weren't liking that at all.

[Shh]…you can't ask [those] questions.

Rev. Adon asked many questions in their childhood because they wanted to better understand the Christian faith. His inquiries often were dismissed, and he was mocked because the adults around him could not believe that a child would be so audacious with asking such questions.

[*Children are not to ask questions.]*

[Children are supposed to be seen, and never heard.]

Another tension Rev. Adon has with many Black churches is that they are still living in the past.

I feel that a lot of the **Black churches** that I went to…
[or] that I [have been] in space with.

They really boasted about […]
their history,

You know?

Being the **anchor [of] grassroots**
of the **Civil Rights Movement.**

I think [many churches]
hold [onto] that…
Kind of like
fairy tale.
[…]

[But] its current day right now!

What [is] required [of us]
[Is] to **continue the movement!**
[…]

[The church of today is] not willing
to make the same sacrifices,
[…] [And]

Do the same work that the churches
was doing in the 60s and 70s.

But then,
You look right now in the movement that we're having…
whether it be the movement for
Black Lives
or the movement to
free Palestine
or just a movement
against imperialism in general,

Like **they're being**
really quiet
and *really complacent*
and *docile.*

For Rev. Adon, it is difficult to be in Black church spaces where folx are talking about what their church *used* to do in the Civil Rights Movement, as if that were sufficient for what we need in the world today. He feels like these churches are complacent and docile in the contemporary era; there are plenty of issues to fight for and protest right now. However, these churches rather remain quiet.

When Rev. Adon was in college, they were a part of a church for two years. This church was supposedly non-denominational, yet for Rev. Adon it felt "somewhere between Baptist and Pentecostal." During those two years at this church, they had several tensions with the church, the congregation, and with the pastor. Similar to what Haikoo and Renee described, this church was very focused on money. Also, at this church, Rev. Adon's praise was frequently questioned, and the pastor regularly tried to manipulate him.

While at this last church, Rev. Adon's praise was constantly ridiculed because it was not as expressive as his fellow congregants.

They would like question my praise
because I wasn't much of a
runner or
a **yeller** or
[a] **screamer** or
[a] **crier**.

[…]

I wasn't like *theatrical*.

If anything, I will
close my eyes…right,
when I'm really feeling
[the Holy Spirit]

I would […] clap,

But they would be like…

"Yo! You're not really doing it."
"You're not really a part of this."
"You're not, […], fully embracing this."
"You're resenting the power of God"

I'm like,

"No,
I just don't praise that way.
Like, that's not me."

But they were **<u>always</u>**
trying to **pressure** me
and **force** me into
praising like that,

[…]

[This put a] bad taste in my mouth.

Since Rev. Adon was a quieter worshipper than his fellow congregants, he was often pressured to be "louder" with his praise. Because of this, they never felt like they could be their natural self in that space.

Also at this church, Rev. Adon noticed that there was "a lot of manipulation," and "a lot of coercion to pay a ridiculous amount of tithes."

And I mean,
not 10%.

I mean like
Thousands of [Thousands of] [Thousands of] [Thousands of] [Thousands of]
Dollars.

Like [the church was] trying to
Incentivize us to
Pay a lot of money,

So we can buy…
a Church Home.
[…]
A Church building.
[…]
Sadly a lot of folks,
Ended up spending
their **refund checks**
and spending **even more than that**
to the Church.

And looking back,
[…]
I'm like they **never bought**
A Church Home.

But **they did buy**
the pastor […]
A brand new multi-million-dollar house.
A G wagon.
An AMG Mercedes Benz.
I can go on and on…

Rev. Adon witnessed many of his fellow congregants become broke for the sake of building a new church. However, their money was never being spent on that. Their money was paying for the pastor's lavish lifestyle.

Other than being upset with how the pastor was using the congregation's tithes, Rev. Adon did not like how the pastor would try to manipulate him.

I remember there
was **one time,**
when there was like a
whole bunch of folks in a row,
and **I** was one of those folks
all the way at the end of that row.

And [**the pastor**] was going down the row,
putting **his hands**
on folks' […] forehead[s]

And when he got to me….

He thought I was gonna
Drop

like everybody else.

You know,
he thought was I gonna
fall back
and all that.

And I didn't
fall.
(shakes his head)
[…]
I wasn't feeling it.
I wasn't in[to] that.

I don't know…

It just wasn't…

*I'm not gonna **fake** anything.*

And he got
SO MAD!

He was like,
"I rebuke the devil that's operating in you."

[…]
I'm like,
"What?!"
"*Like this is **insane**."*

Then there was another time that the same pastor convinced Rev. Adon to help him organize a march to the polls for voting.

He actually asked me to help him.
Organize a march.
A stroll to the polls.
And I did.

On the way to the polls…
the **police didn't let us** get there.

They like **barricaded the streets.**
Tear gassed
Everyone.
All the women,
and children,
and elderly.
Everyone who was there…

And then when [the pastor]
did the lawsuit [for the march]…

He didn't even think to
Invite me

[For the march]
And **He asked me to** […]
help with security
and be the lead marshal
and all of that.

And you know I did,
A lot of mobilizing,
A lot of outreach
For the event.

And of course,
I felt
responsible…

and so *many people*
were harmed.

But **He didn't**
Invite me

in the lawsuit???

Not to be a witness…
Not to be a plaintiff…
not to be anything,
not to be a part of it at all.

[This] shows me why
my mentors [and] my elders
told me not to associate with Him.

After putting forth so much effort to make the march to the polls happen, and then seeing so many people get hurt, Rev. Adon was hurt and in disbelief that this pastor would not make him a part of his lawsuit. Ever since this incident, Rev. Adon's eyes have been opened to seeing what type of person this pastor is. Rev. Adon is waiting for the right opportunity to sit down with the pastor and have a conversation about his experiences. Nonetheless, they have learned strategies to navigate this and other tensions with the Black church.

How Rev. Adon Navigated Tensions with the Black Church

Throughout Rev. Adon's life, there were various strategies they adopted to navigate the tensions they felt around the church and Christianity more broadly. When he was a child, he was quite curious about Christianity, so he asked a lot questions. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, Rev. Adon was ignored and ridiculed for asking challenging questions. Eventually, he found it was best for him to stop asking questions.

If they didn't answer my question
or if I got pushed back
from answering my question,

I would **just stop**
asking questions,

[…]

It's a childhood trauma or childhood wound that I have,
and it still shows up today.

And even in those spaces
where I get **triggered or harmed,**
I get *really quiet*

I just I get distant.

Even if I'm physically there.
Like.
I'm not actually present.
I'm actually not there, you know?

Sadly, Rev. Adon was deeply impacted by being dismissed as a child, primarily because they asked too many questions. This hurt still impacts them today. Whenever their childhood wounds are nicked, they begin to get really quiet and revert into their more introverted self.

I felt like I wasn't appreciated or valued
*for who **I fully am**…*

I [couldn't] show
who I fully am.

Right?

I would mask [it].
I would […] suppress myself.

Then in his teenager years, Rev. Adon strategically decided to accept Christ as his Lord and Savior, so he would not go to Hell.

It was like 2012.
And remember, [people saying]
"The world [is] gonna end."

[…]

[I] didn't know
if I should believe it or not,
but I would always ask…

"OK, let's just say the world does end…
I haven't done communion.
I never got saved like… I never did any of that.

Am I going to Hell?"

And the pastor was like,
"According to the Bible, […]
If <u>you're not saved,</u> and <u>you die,</u>
the end of the world [comes].
Whatever happens.
Yeah. **You're gonna go to Hell."**

And I'm like…(*widens eyes)*

Most folks probably
would run the other way…

Well, *I ran towards* the **<u>theology</u>**
[…]
But I did it strategically.

Because many around Rev. Adon believed that the world was going to end on Monday, December 21, 2012, he believed it too. So, he strategically accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord on Savior on Sunday, December 20, 2012.

I woke up that morning.

I told my mom,
"Look mom! I'm getting saved today!"

She's like,
"Really?
Are you sure that's what you wanna do?"

[…]

"Yes! (nods) Mm-hmm."[…]
"Yeah, I'm doing it!"

I remember like going to church.

[Near the end of the service,]
[The pastor] asked,

"Does anyone here want to
<u>take Jesus</u>
as their Lord and Savior?"

And I raised my hand.

As soon as I did that,
My mom started crying,
[…] <u>tears of joy.</u>

The pastor started
<u>speaking in tongues.</u>

Everybody started standing up,
[I] got a **standing ovation.**

People [were] **clapping**.
People started breaking out
and **shouting**

[…]

I remember thinking…
"All of this is for me?!
And I don't even feel it."

I felt so *awkward.*

Even to this day,
that was
the most awkward feeling I ever felt

Because it was like
the *fakest* I've ever been.
[…]
I had to pretend
like I wanted [to be saved]…
Even though I really didn't.

On his expected last day of Earth, Rev. Adon prepared diligently to not sin. To his dismay, he woke up the next morning being very much alive.

I woke up the next morning,

[Frustrated.] **Furious.**
Angry.
[Upset.]

For **so long** of my life
I *suppressed*,

what I wanted to do.
My desires.
My impulses.
All because I thought
they were gonna be sins.
All because I thought
I was gonna go to Hell
for it all.

[…]

I didn't go back
to church after that.

I became atheist.

I was like,
"God, isn't real?"
[…]
*I'm doing **everything***
I want to do."

"I'm done."

For two years, Rev. Adon navigated his tensions with his religion and the Black church by being an atheist. During this period of time, they started drinking and partying a lot. They were doing everything they were told they could not do before.

I was living life to the fullest.
I [was] living as if I would die tomorrow.

Eventually in college, he found his way back to his faith and joined a church. In order to navigate the tensions he was still feeling about church, Rev. Adon remained distant.

[Folx at the church]
we're trying to get me to be
more and more […] involved,

They were trying to get me part of […]
certain groups,
like subgroups
and things like that,

[…]

Like they always [were]
Try[ing] to *pull me in…*

And try[ing] to make me
Part of the armor bearers
or the leadership team.

[…]

I was always *intentionally* distant.

Rev. Adon navigated his tensions with the church by being purposeful with distancing himself and only attending the events he saw value in. However, after two years at this church, Rev. Adon felt it was best to leave.

It was a lot of things that <u>didn't</u>
jive well with me.

That […] <u>didn't</u>
resonate with [me.]
That kind of <u>made me</u>
cringe
And made me *feel* **uncomfortable**.

I kind of like pushed those to the side,

But eventually, […]
Those things were just [too]
overwhelming.

I just couldn't
[…]
suppress it anymore.

And that's why I decided to leave.

I'm glad I left,
[…]
That's when I […]
started my own **church.**

After witnessing the corruption and the manipulation of this last church that often made Rev. Adon cringe and feel uncomfortable, he could not stay at this church no longer. It was time to move on. Upon leaving the church, Rev. Adon began his own church. In the next section, I expound more on Rev. Adon's faith journey and how he decided to create his own space of worship.

Rev. Adon's Faith Journey and His Ministry

During the time when Rev. Adon was atheist, they ended up getting to a point where they were tired of partying, drinking, and "turning up." They began to discern that they were "looking for happiness in all the wrong places."

> And then I realized
> instead of looking at [spirituality] externally,
> I needed to start looking at an *internally*.
>
> And my life drastically **changed**
> in a matter of moments.
>
> Just from that
> **paradigm**
> **shift**.

Once Rev. Adon experienced this paradigm shift, he began to recognize that the voice in his head was not his own but his intuition the entire time.

> Even though I stopped
> ***Believing*** in God
> In 2012
> […]
>
> I was still
> *Operating*
> with my intuition.
>
> I was still
> *Listening*
> to my intuition,
>
> There were so many situations
> that happened
>
> where I **avoided [something]**
> because I listen[ed]
> to that *voice*
> telling me to
> *"leave"*
> or
>
> *"go home"*
> or

"switch"
or
do something different.

And I just was like,

"Whoa!
Like, that was way too close."

[All of this]
<u>strengthened my faith.</u>
Not in God per se…
But in my intuition,
in my higher self.

Once Rev. Adon began to understand how his higher self and physical self were related to one another, he made some lifestyle changes.

And then I stopped
smoking and
drinking and
partying
for a whole year.

I started *meditating*
every day deeply.
[…]
I was praying like
<u>10 times a day.</u>

I was in a
<u>constant</u> state of *bliss*

[…]

I was really *sensitive to*
<u>energy</u> and
<u>vibrations</u> and
<u>frequencies</u>.

[…]
I was *intuitive.*

[…]

I was like the
New Age spiritual person.

[…]

So *in tune,*

[Very much in alignment]

In the midst of carrying out these lifestyle changes, he eventually returned back to church. This is the last church he attended, before starting his own.

As Rev. Adon grew more into his spiritual self, he developed his own philosophy, encapsulated in the following words:

I come in peace!
God is religion,
Religion is not God.
God is science,
Science is not God
Religion is man,
Science is man.
Man is war…
God is peace!

It is through this philosophy where he discerned God to be "greater than the boundaries of the Black church or just the church in general." It was then when he began to see God in a different light.

God is a frequency.

God is an energy
that's <u>living in</u>
all of Us
In every living thing
around Us.

And You can <u>only see it,</u>
when you're
<u>tapped in.</u>

Tuned into that **<u>frequency</u>**.

You can only
feel it
and hear it
when you're still.

The current relationship that Rev. Adon has with God is quite intimate, sacred, and personal. In this budding connection, they use the terminology of "Source" to also refer to God. In order to maintain a strong relationship with God, they try to stay consistent and disciplined in how often they pray and meditate. Because the "more that [they] pray" and the "more that they meditate it becomes a little bit clearer to understand, hear, and listen" to what Source tells him to do. As Rev. Adon continues to grow in their connection with God, they want to model to others on "how they can build their relationship [and] experience [with] Source." This is what led them to starting their own ministry and church.

Creating Conscious Connection

After leaving the non-denominational church, Rev. Adon embarked on establishing his own ministry. At first, he hosted "Wisdom Wednesdays" in his student apartment, where a few people would gather and share in worship. In his living room, he had "five people, then 10…20…30" all at once. When it outgrew his apartment, he and his congregation "moved onto the campus of North Carolina A&T where [they] eventually became a student organization […] called Conscious Connection." Rev. Adon would consider this interfaith ministry to be omnist in practice "with [a] base of Christianity." For him, omnism is a theological or spiritual approach that "believes there is truth in all religion, but not one religion is the absolute truth." Ultimately, Rev. Adon's ministry would expand to at least three other colleges and universities.

Once Rev. Adon graduated from college, it was becoming "harder to manage [Conscious Connection, since he] wasn't on campus anymore and […] was a teacher." So, the ministry moved off campus to the community.

[It] was operating up until like two years ago. […]
In
Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro.

[…]

[Then] I got to a point
where I [was] like,
"This is pulling a lot out of me."

It was just *draining,*
<u>taking a lot of time,</u>
capacity
[and] **energy.**

Rev. Adon's Spiritual Calling

At the point in which he was scattered trying to run a ministry in three cities while working full-time, one of his spiritual mentors told him it was time for him to be ordained. For the longest while, he ran from his spiritual calling.

[Running from my spiritual calling]
Feels like…

Let's say…

There is like a **big giant oak tree**
and you wrap
like a <u>big rubber band</u> around it
and you attach it to yourself…

And every moment you get,
you try to
step further and further away,
you know,

And sometimes it seems like the rubber band is *getting longer*?

It's stretching out.

So you get a *little further,* a little further.

But if you *stop resisting,*
stop pushing away.

Eventually, if you just become still,

You're right back into that oak tree,
Right into place.
[Right where you]
[Are supposed]
[to be]

However, it was not until Rev. Adon's best friend passed away, the person who he founded Conscious Connection with, when he finally answered his spiritual call. This is when he stopped being complacent.

I agreed that,
I'm not gonna be complacent anymore.

I'm gonna do this!
[I'm gonna be ordained]

And I
jumped
into it
[…]

The first funeral I was able to facilitate
was [my Best Friend's] funeral.

Following two years of training, Rev. Adon was ordained in November of 2023.

Rev. Adon's Future Church and Ministry

Since they have been ordained, Rev. Adon has big plans for their future ministry and church. Their future church will be omnist like Conscious Connection was, but instead this new church will have different theology to guide it. Throughout the course of their planning to be ordained, they studied Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation theology, James Cones' Black Liberation theology, and Howard Thurman's Mystical theology, and also learned about Womanist Theology

and Queer Theology. He plans to ground his new church in these theologies. At its core, he will center his church and every ministry that is created in political action. For Rev. Adon, he strongly believes that:

Jesus was a Revolutionary Socialist,
[therefore]
his way of life
cannot
be separated by his politics.

Our way of life
cannot be separated
by our intentional
daily practices.
Everything we do
intentionally
is our religion.
How we treat people
and
how we treat ourselves.

Therefore,

our religion/spirituality
cannot
be separated from our politics.

Rev. Adon's philosophy, as well as the theologies that I listed above that influence it, will be the foundation of his new church.

For his new church, he envisions his first services to be virtual, inclusive, and concise.

Like I really want to
Hone in on,
It just being a really
virtual inclusive space.
[…]
I want it to be short.
Really concise.
I don't wanna be longer than 30 minutes.

In addition, they want their church to be accessible for anybody, so cost is not an issue.

People aren't as comfortable with
tithing anymore,
and *donating*
and *giving money.*

So I'm **not gonna** really
be pressing that.

I'm gonna try to
keep the overhead expenses
very low,
especially starting off.

So if folks are tithing or giving,
it's something that…
[*They want to do*]
[…]
I also want to **stress** the fact that…

I don't want *tithing*
to just be monetary.

I want it to be skill based as well.
Or capacity based

So if you have the capacity
to work on a website,

[You can give back that way.]

You have the capacity
to edit videos.

[You can give back that way.]

If you have the capacity to
manage social media.

[You can give back that way.]

Like, I think all of those are very important
in my ministry

And…

It's gonna be really different.

For Rev. Adon, they want their future church to be appealing and welcoming to those who are normally not welcomed and accepted in traditional spaces, especially traditional Black church spaces.

A lot of folks say,
"I'm not spiritual."
"I'm not political."

Well,
You don't have to be
any one of those…
But the world's gonna
govern you
politically
and
spiritually,

whether you
(chuckles)
realize it or not.

Like,

You don't have to do politics,
but politics is gonna do you,

Right.

Like,

you don't have to do spirit,
but spirit is gonna do you.

Whether you
(laughs)
realize it or not.

And that's my ministry.

It's not attacking
any one religion.
Or bashing anyone

We can find fault
in all religions.

But what I wanna do is
I wanna

Pull the beauty **Pull the love**

and the intersections.

The similarities between
Sufism, Kabbalah, Mysticism.

I wanna
pull these together
so that **folks can have** a very
simple and practical,
every day,
self-made routine.

Like just for them.

Like whatever looks best […]
for their style,
for their beliefs,
where they are in that
certain time and space.

And through that I see.

Rev. Adon's faith journey is quite dynamic and ongoing. He does not know that God is real, but he does know his life is. And he is doing everything he wants to do. He so excited to see what happens with his future church and to see where Source places him.

Can you believe?
I'm losing my religion
Thank God

Helping you lose yours…Is my job

How Does Rev. Adon's Faith Influence and Shape his Work in Social Justice

In the realm of social justice, Rev. Adon considers himself to be a trainer, an organizer, a student, a leader, and a pastor in the movement. As a trainer and organizer, he "teaches structural racism and how to organize." He facilities trainings locally and nationally. He is a student of the

movement by being a "student of the community." This means he listens to community members and asks questions about what their experiencing. In addition, he is constantly "studying the movements in the past" to see what worked and what did not. This helps him stay prepared in his social justice work. Unintentionally, Rev. Adon has been deemed a leader in the movement. This is a role that those in the community have given him "because of how [he shows] up." In movement work, he strives to remain aligned with the vision of the community and encourages the work that they are already doing.

Currently, Rev. Adon is learning what it means to be a pastor/faith leader who works for social justice. This is a continuous growing edge for them, because they see themselves as a new age pastor working alongside Black pastors and communities who are very traditional.

> I look exactly how I am.
>
> Like I got locs.
> I don't gotta shape up, right?
> I'm like free spirited.
> I look revolutionary.
>
> I got crystals
> on my neck
> and
> on my wrist.
>
> I mean you can look at me
> and kind of tell like,
>
> *"OK, this is a new age kind of brother."*

Since Rev. Adon is a "new age kind of brother," they are "very, very intentional with how [they] show up" in community spaces, especially as they work and live in rural Johnston County.

> I'm not letting everyone know
> I'm revolutionary.
> […]

I'm just being,
like *really graceful* and
methodical
of how
I approach the Black church
and how I build relationships
with the Black church.

I know if I'm like…

I'm nonbinary.

Or say things like,

"*I'm a revolutionary."*
[…]
"I support LGBTQ."
"I support a women's right to choose"

Like,
I might get
crossed out,
checked out,

And now,
I can't build power, right?
I can't build solidarity.

So that's a **constant**
struggle that I'm having

[It's] like,

"Do I show up as my full self?"

Or

"Do I just show a little bit
that I know that they'll accept
so that I can continue to organize
and pull in their congregation?"

(shrug shoulders)

This ongoing conflict that Rev. Adon is facing is difficult, but their upbringing in the Black church prepared them to be patient and build trust.

> First and foremost,
>
> I'm trying to build […]
> relationships that's
> founded in trust.
>
> So once they […] trust,
>
> [That I] actually *care* about
> the Kingdom of God.
>
> That I actually *care* about
> the Black community.
>
> [That] I *care* about Johnson County,
> this neighborhood.
>
> [That] I *care* about their ministry.
>
> [That] I *care* about, you know,
> life of people.
>
> Once they **trust me,**
> then I can start to
> push the envelope
> a little bit more.
>
> I can start to, you know,
> bring in some more concepts to
> kind of push back
> or
> call in when necessary.

Other than using patience that he learned in church to navigate the constant struggle of Black church spaces., Rev. Adon would say that his dynamic relationship with church made him a revolutionary.

I think my work in the church
is connected to my social justice [vision].

Like,
My social justice doesn't start
or end in the church.
But.
The church starts
and ends with my social justice.

Even though they are triggered from being dismissed and ignored for asking controversial questions in church, this experience of being shut down and ridiculed for being inquisitive aided them in their spiritual journey. It was in the Black church and through it, where Rev. Adon learned how to be persistent, resilient, and to find out a range of ways to be effective in one's mission and calling. These qualities have surely assisted them in their social justice work as a trainer, an organizer, a student, a leader, and a pastor in the movement for racial justice and social transformation.

Rev. Adon's Advice for those Navigating Tensions with the Black Church

For those who have tensions with the Black church, Rev. Adon would tell those folx to join his church, People Power Peace (PPP) instead.

I would tell folks to <u>find what pulls them</u> into PPP…

It might be the **politics.**

It might be the **omnism**.

It might be…the sense of **community**.

[…]

[It might be] **the events**
The virtual events,
in person events.

[Whatever you are looking for, we probably have a place for you.]

Additionally, Rev. Adon would tell folx that having conflict with their religion will forever be a constant.

As transparently as I know how,
I don't think I ever will have
[A tension free relationship with my religion].

I think the tension
is like the contrast.

It helps it grow
and expand my relationship
with [my] spirituality
and my religion as an omnist.

For him, conflict in religion just helps us grow in our faith and our relationship with our God.

Rev. Adon also has advice for those who are running from their spiritual calling.

Keep running!
Keep running!
[Keep running!]

Run as fast as you can!!

And *when you get tired…*
Call me.

Run as far as you wanna go it.

It's a journey.
Life is a journey.

I ran from my spiritual calling.

And the more I ran.
The more I realized that
I was being pulled back to something.

I think that's a *beautiful part*
about running.

And sometimes you're looking
for
something that might be with *you*
the whole time.

But you need to go on that journey
for your own personal experience.

Conclusion

Rev. Adon was recently ordained and is looking forward to growing his church People Power Peace (PPP), which is grounded in the religion of Omnism. Like Haikoo, Rev. Adon is no longer Christian and believes there to be truth in all religions. Although they no longer identify as a Christian, it is important for them to be a part of the Black church and politically organize with Black pastors and their congregations. Unfortunately, in order for Rev. Adon to be present in these Black church spaces he has to be intentional and strategic with how he shows up. And similar to Renee and Anna, they believe they will always have tension with their spirituality and religion.

CHAPTER VIII: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

I'm from a time and place
Where there's no time or space
Far beyond the heavens and
Way beyond the realms of outer space
[…]
Transcending this world of limited sight
Reuniting my masculine and feminine sides
As I follow my breath, my energies rise
Until I reach the site of infinite light
[…]
Samadhi Samadhi
Sat Nam Samadhi
Stay Free

Samadhi by Londrelle (2020)

Before I go into the analysis of my study, I want to share where I am in my spiritual journey, and how I got here. First, let me set the atmosphere. *Hmm…let me light some incenses. What will I light…Let's do Nag Champa, Super Hit, and Ganesh. Mmm…that spells delightful. Hmm…what's next. Oh yes! I have to turn on my diffuser. Hmm…what will I add? Oh, I know! Let me add two drops of lavender, a splash of Florida Water, one drop of patchouli, and two drops of peppermint. Now, it's time to take it all in.*

Breathe in for five seconds……one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two…three…

Breathe out for five seconds……one…two…three…four…five.

Allow the sweet smells of the incenses and the essential oils to take over your nostrils. Ground yourself in the here and now.

Breathe in for five seconds……one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two…three…

Breathe out for five seconds……one…two…three…four…five.

Josette, are you ready to begin this chapter

Oh yes I am! Let's begin…

Breathe
Shake
Dance
Nah, but for real

Breathe

Take in
Deep breathes
Of air
Of space
And
Time

Ground yourself

Ground your thinking

Place your mind
Into today
Not into a distant memory
Or time

Be present
In here and now

Breathe

Josette Ferguson, *March 2021*

As I follow my breath, my energies rise

In my faith journey, I walk with my Spirit Guides, Ancestors, and the Divine. They are right by my side, and guide me in every step of my spiritual and life journey. Even though I have not gone consistently to church in years, I feel more fulfilled and spiritually aligned than ever. As I grow in close relationship with my Spirit Guides, Ancestors, and the Divine, I am also learning more about the Buddhist practices of meditation, and sound baths. It is through these spiritual and Buddhist practices that I have begun to see my body as pedagogy (Jones and Hughes-

Decatur, 2012). By seeing my body as pedagogy, I have developed a praxis of wholeness and self-care that I have infused in my political organizing work. In my praxis of wholeness, I have coupled it with a praxis of embodiment. Lama Rod Owens (2020) defines embodiment as "the work of returning home to the body" (p. 119). In my embodiment work, I have learned what it means to feel both joy and pain in my body (Owens, 2020). Through this practice of wholeness, I am learning to be comfortable with my body, to return home to the truth of who I am, and how this truth has been restricted from me for a good part of my life (Owens, 2020). With my body being my pedagogy and with my praxis of wholeness, I have learned what it means to trust my body. I do this by listening to the sounds it makes, and feeling through each sensation that arises. For instance, if I hear gurgles from my stomach, I become my own therapist and start asking myself a list of questions to figure out what is going on.

Therapist Me: *(with concern)* Josette, have you eaten today?

Me: I think I did…oh yeah, I had that protein smoothie and a sandwich about two hours ago.

Therapist Me: *(with concern)* Hmm…are you anxious about something?

Me: *(anxiously)* I don't think so…but then again…I have so much on my mind. I have to get this dissertation done, and I have to finish that report for work. And, I have to stop by my parents' house, and find time for the gym ….I know I am forgetting something else…I have so much on my mind.

Therapist Me: (with calm tone) Why don't you take a moment to ground yourself. That could help with the anxiety. Why don't you light some incenses, turn on your diffuser, make a pot of peppermint and chamomile tea, and write through your emotions. Then, make a list of everything you need to get done today. That might help settle your stomach some.

Me: *(relieved)* Thanks for these suggestions. I will definitely give them a try.

This exercise may sound silly to some, but this practice has assisted me in trusting my body more.

Often times, my body reminds me to eat, to relax, and generally just take better care of myself. My body has wisdom that my mind does not have, because my body is planted in the here and now, whereas my mind is either in the past, or future, and hardly in the present. This is how my body is my pedagogy. By learning to trust my body, I also have learned to love my body and all its intricacies. Some of these being my sensitivity, my broad shoulders, and my deep voice. At one point in time, I did not love or like these parts of myself. But now, I am beginning to fully embrace those pieces of me. Because I love and trust my body, I feel free to be nonbinary. In this fluid space, I am able to grow more familiar with my masculine sides of myself, and embrace my femininity at the same time. I am so grateful for this spiritual journey. Because of it, I feel free to express myself unapologetically and authentically, while also deepening my relationship with my Spirit Guides, Ancestors, and the Divine. So how did I get to this point in my life? How did I develop a praxis of wholeness and embodiment? How did I begin this spiritual journey? The COVID-19 pandemic happened. That's what.

Like many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic made a lasting impression on me. While navigating the uncertainty of the world ending by an unknown and faceless virus, I developed new spiritual practices. I began meditating, sound bathing, reciting affirmations, and speaking and communing with my Ancestors, Spirit Guides, and the Divine. I was exposed to many of these practices by one of my dear friends at the time, who was my spiritual saving grace. I started developing these spiritual practices when it felt odd for me to attend virtual worship spaces, and I was scared to commune in-person spiritually with strangers because of my looming fear of catching COVID. So, I retreated into myself. I began to learn what it means to be embodied, and

I found solace in these spiritual gifts and being in communion with my Spirit Guides, Ancestors, and the Divine. In addition to acquiring these new spiritual practices, I started learning more about Buddhism.

My home is bliss and infinite light

After reading Lama Rod Owens' book, *Love and Rage* (2020) for one of my doctoral classes in 2021, I was compelled to dive deeper into learning more about Buddhism. In 2023, I read *Black & Buddhist (2020),* which aided me in understanding how Black Buddhists use the practices of Buddhism to traverse the white supremacist world that they live in. As I learned more about Buddhism, I organically found myself intertwining Buddhist practices with the spiritual and embodiment practices I had already acquired during COVID. These spiritual tools have often assisted in calming my mind, body, soul, and spirit, and has helped me in reorienting the energies of my frequent unwelcomed house guests, depression and anxiety, whenever they arrive.

For the majority of my adult life, I have had to wrestle with the unwanted bedfellows of depression and anxiety. These two love to randomly wreak havoc on me during any occasion that they feel like, which can make it difficult for me to be productive, and to get out of bed at times. Back when I was regularly attending services at my home church, there had been multiple times that I had the urge to go down to the altar and just cry uncontrollably. These were the times I was the most depressed and anxious. Yet, I never went down. I fought against the urge, because I had witnessed several of my fellow congregants, who did go down to the altar crying uncontrollably; be later talked about, judged, and ostracized. Like Anna, all they wanted was comfort and reassurance. They wanted to be reassured that what they were feeling mentally and emotionally was not abnormal. Yet, they were made to feel like something was inherently wrong with them.

From observing these damaging actions done to my fellow congregants, I did not feel like I could freely discuss or get support for my mental health at my home church. This as well as my sexuality were ultimately the reason why I left my home church. Thankfully, through therapy, medication, and developing the spiritual and embodiment tools I listed above, I have been able to better manage my depression and anxiety. I just hate I had to leave the church in order to better take care of my mental health.

Let me make this clear, I do still believe in God. Often, I find myself leaning on some of the lessons from my upbringing in Christianity. However, I do not anticipate returning to worship in a primarily Christian space. Like Rev. Adon, I will intentionally keep being involved in political organizing in Black church spaces, while being very strategic in how I show up there, but I will worship elsewhere. Similar to Haikoo, I have discovered and felt so much freedom and bliss in my current spiritual practices and faith journey that going to a space that negates that would hurt me deeply. I will always miss the music and the fellowship of being in Black church spaces. Nonetheless, I am grateful that I do not have to worry about ever experiencing spiritual trauma again.

I wish you a life filled with joy
May you be filled with persistence and purpose
May you be guided in service
May your life be transformed
May your life be healed
May you forgive and celebrate life
May you live and celebrate love
All that exists is love
Be love and see love
In every heart and every soul
Remember to play.
It's just a play
Remember God,
all is God
You are That.
You are free

Stay free

[It's feels so good to be free.]

This is my season for grace
For favor
This is my season
To reap what I have sown
[…]
I've got a seed in the ground
[…]
Listen,
Everything is working together for my good

It's Working by William Murphy (2013)

In this dissertation, I shared the open and vulnerable narratives of four Black North Carolina based social justice folx, who have current tensions with the Black church, as well as sharing pieces from my own story and autoethnography. I was led to conduct this research study because of my own tension with the church, and there being a desperate need for this kind of research, especially to heal church wounds and reimagine the role of faith in Black activism. Within the last 10 years, there have been some research publications that discuss the tension-filled relationship that some Black people have with the church (Hipp et al., 2019; Piper et al., 2019; Benbow, 2022; Lewis-Giggetts, 2022). Yet, we need more of this type of research. In this study, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. Why do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church still stay a part of it?
2. How do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church navigate these tension-filled relationships and stay a part of the church?

After completing an autoethnographic study and interviewing four Black North Carolina based community/ political organizers, activists, and advocates, I am able to provide some answers to these two questions.

There are multiple reasons why Black social justice folx remain with the Black church. Many of us stay connected to the institution because of family, music, relationship with God and Christianity, and connection to Black culture. Others like Rev. Adon and I, manage to stay in deep relationship with the church so we can politically organize with Christian faith leaders and their congregants, even though we do not attend these churches as parishioners. My participants and I navigate our tensions with the church by using some of the following techniques:

- We take time away from church or church hop, which means attending different Black churches until we find one that feels like it could be home.
- We identify with different parts of church and worship that give us peace (like music, people, different ministries, etc.).
- We strategically accept Christianity in our lives, while resisting some of the church teachings and expectations that trouble us.
- We remain emotionally distant.

Interestingly enough, each participant and I all have experienced trauma in church spaces, yet we still fight for the continued existence and importance of the Black church. Moreover, all of us believe that having tension within our faith and spiritual journey is natural and helps us grow. In this chapter, I read across my participants and my stories, discuss my findings, provide recommendations on how the Black church can be improved for the better, discuss recommendations for the future of this research study, and end with some final thoughts on this project and how it changed me.

This is the season for grace…

Discussion of Findings

Despite our tensions with the Black church, Renee, Anna, Haikoo, Rev. Adon, and I remain connected with the church for a multitude of reasons. Renee and Anna both actively attend church, so they can grow deeper in their relationship with God and learn more about the Christian faith. Renee mostly attends services online a few times a quarter, but also meets a few times a week with her Kingdom Christian group. When Anna is able, she attends church in-person, and she enjoys participating in daily early morning prayers with her church. For Haikoo, he attends church when he is supporting a friend or a family member, or when he is asked to sing or play an instrument. Rev. Adon and I stay in deep connection with the Black church so we can politically organize in Black church spaces. For me, this political work looks like working alongside Black clergy and other Black faith leaders to brainstorm ways to get more Black people involved in voting. Moreover, whenever I am asked to lead trainings and workshops for grassroot organizations, they are most times at Black churches. Even though Haikoo and I are not frequently a part of Black church spaces anymore, we "still gonna be churchy," because Black church culture is so deeply embedded in our Blackness.

After all four portraits were developed, I noticed four themes that touched the tensions of each participant as well as my own tensions. These themes were greed and capitalism, ostracism, silencing, and expectations to conform. Renee, Haikoo, and Rev. Adon all disclosed many examples of how they witnessed pastors prey on their congregations for money. And then use the money they collected in tithes for their own personal gain. In addition, Anna, Haikoo, Rev. Adon, and I all shared our many accounts of how we have been ostracized, and silenced at church, and seen it happen to others.

And, Rev. Adon and I have vulnerably shared how we have been pushed to conform at church.

My participants and I all navigate our tensions with the Black church by using various techniques. One technique is leaving the church for a long period of time, but later returning. Another technique that all of us have used is church hopping. We either church hopped to escape church hurt and remove ourselves from unhealthy church environments, or we leave a church to find another that better suits our spiritual and mental health needs. Haikoo and I navigated our tensions with the church by finding parts of church that gave us peace. For him, it was music and friendships, and for me, it was liturgical dancing, and leading service. While regularly attending church, Haikoo and Rev. Adon both strategically accepted Christ, so they were not condemned to Hell by their fellow church members. Lastly, Haikoo, Rev. Adon, and I all have remained emotionally distant in Christian spaces, so we can protect ourselves from potential emotional harm.

These ways of navigating our tensions with the church may be hard to hear for some, especially those who want to defend their own churches and argue that these things do not happen there. However, our experiences are nonetheless valid: experiencing tension, harm, and conflict were our reality, and we know for sure we are not alone. So where do we go from here? Why did I want these questions answered? One of the main reasons I conducted this study was to generate conversation among those in the Black church community around how the church can be improved for the better.

I've got a seed in the ground…

Recommendations for the Black Church

Although all of us have tensions with the church, none of my participants wanted the church to be eradicated; all of us found value and importance in different aspects of our

relationship with the Black church. We want the church to be improved for this generation as well as future generations to come. In this section, I share recommendations for pastors, and recommendations for congregations based on our experiences.

Recommendations for Pastors

We understand that pastors' leadership and management styles, as well as their theological orientations, vary. No two spiritual leaders work in the same ways; each bring their unique visions and calling to the role. Yet no matter how the pastor governs themselves or their church, they have power to change the institution and to make it a more welcoming and supportive space for all people who wish to worship there. One way to do that is to lead by example for their congregants to follow. What I mean by this is that the pastor needs to practice what they preach and not engage in the types of hypocrisy that my participants described or alluded to. In order for the pastor to be most effective, they need to be more like a facilitator for God, rather than a leader for their church. As a facilitator, the pastor teaches their congregants how to grow in their relationship with God and assists congregants in deepening that relationship. Alternatively, when a pastor sees themselves as a leader or figurehead of a church first, they can make it seem like they are the only one who can build a direct connection to God, which then makes them a gatekeeper. When the pastor is seen as gatekeeper, congregants feel like they have to follow everything the pastor does (and wants them to do) in order to "be right with God." When this happens, members of the congregation can find themselves focusing more on pleasing the pastor than growing their own relationship with God. This is when a church can become toxic. As Rev. Adon mentioned in his interviews, "one of [his] main goal[s] of preaching […] is so that [his congregation doesn't] need [him] anymore." He wants to create tools and practices for his congregants that are accessible for them to tap into God whenever they need to.

When a pastor is operating as a facilitator, they are seeking advice and suggestions from parishioners who have noticed gaps and needs of the church. For instance, Renee recommends that pastors consider creating discipleship classes for their congregants that are more than an average Bible study. Within a class like this, parishioners could learn the essentials of Christianity and the history behind the religion, as well as learn strategies to grow deeper in their faith. Moreover, Anna would strongly recommend that pastors consider establishing a mental health ministry. Within this ministry, congregants can learn techniques in how to best manage anxiety, and depression. By adding mental health ministries in churches, pastors can develop skills in how to better treat their parishioners who are suffering with mental illnesses and this could, in turn, aid in preventing spiritual trauma and church hurt.

Furthermore, if pastors want to expand their congregations to be more welcoming to younger generations, they need to think about learning other, sometimes more radical, and social justice oriented, theologies to infuse into their sermons. Some theologies to consider are those that my participants and I mentioned: Womanist Theology, Queer Theology, and a theology of recognition. Womanist theology looks at the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality when studying scripture (Cannon et. al., 2011). Queer theology goes a little deeper than Womanist theology and looks at the intersections of sexuality and gender fluidity when talking about God and scripture (Cheng, 2011). And a theology of recognition seeks to find new ways of "thinking of how God operates" (Aihiokhai, 2020, p. 150) in the world and seeks to affirm the fact that humanity is complex.

Since pastors are seen to be the head of their churches, it is up to them to lead by example so their congregations can follow. Pastors should also consider becoming more of a facilitator in their churches, so they can teach their parishioners how to deepen their relationships with God.

Furthermore, pastors should add ministries that will directly help their congregations in their spiritual and mental health needs, and expand the theology they use to welcome in younger generations to their churches as well as grow their own spiritual mind.

Recommendations for the Congregation

Even though pastors are generally considered to be the head of the church, members of the congregation too have power. Congregants can choose to follow a pastor's teachings or just follow the ones that most resonate with them. I offer recommendations for them based on my own and my participants experiences. Congregations have to work on being more inclusive, which can assist in welcoming younger generations to a church. A pastor can learn new theology, and become more of a facilitator, which can attract new parishioners. However, if the congregation is not on board, these new folx will not stay. In addition, many churches need to be rebranded. Rebranding is more than changing the logo, the slogan of the church, and hiring a younger pastor, it also means that there needs to be a shift of thinking within the congregation. In becoming more inclusive, the congregation needs to be willing to accept the changes that comes when new parishioners enter the church. With new people comes new ideas and new needs. It is hard to create change when older congregants do not want change to happen. In the long run, this hurts the longevity and sustainability of the church and its mission.

When congregations are open to welcoming in new people into their churches, they are willing to accept people for who they are, and do not try to change them. Haikoo's elucidates:

> when you look at more inclusive churches. [These] churches don't judge people for tattoos. Or judge people for the way that they dress or [their] certain lifestyles that don't seem saved. […] [These churches] accept people as they are and let their own convictions do the work.

It is not the job of the congregation to condemn people for not being "Godlike." None of us are perfect. Pointing out and dwelling on the flaws and the sins in others only creates toxicity in church and shrinks the congregation. Remember without a congregation, there is no church. Yet, in order to be a congregation that accepts the lifestyles of their parishioners, congregants have to be willing to follow up with those who ask for help. Most times, folx seek out churches when they need assistance. Welcoming churches have congregations that are prepared to give aid to those who need it. This means that they do more than just pray for these individuals. They actually reach out to them and check in on them. Anna argues that congregations should at least reach out after prayer and do *tangible* follow-up. This requires:

> some type of phone call [or] anything else beyond that. You know. […] But at least a phone call just to just let the person know that [they] were seen. [They] were heard. [Their] feelings are validated. We cannot escape the human condition. Some people have more problems or trauma than others, but I don't think anybody gets through this life without any problems. So just validate that [they] were seen, [they] were heard, [their] concerns are valid, and I care[d] enough about you and the experience that we shared and praying that I want to just check on you and see how you're doing.

When congregations do tangible follow-up, they recognize that we all need a little bit of help to get by and some need more help than others. By doing a simple follow-up with members who are struggling, it can go a long way because it shows a person that people actually care about them at church. This can ultimately assist in building long lasting relationships in congregations, which can aid in the long-term sustainability and health of a church.

Listen, everything is working together for [our] good

Recommendations for Future Research

For the future of this research, I would love to interview more people and expand my reach across the state of North Carolina. Creating more portraits of Black social justice activists who have tensive relationships with the church would help expand our understanding of both their struggles and how we might reform practices in the church so that more people feel welcomed in this space. Along with increasing the number of participants, I would love to administer a survey to get a wider range of experiences. In that survey, I would ask questions about demographics of churches, like size of congregation, age range of congregants, age of pastor, number of years the person has been at a church, denomination of the church, and if their church is politically active. After completing the study, I would like to publish a book, and articles. Also, I would love to produce other modalities to showcase my findings. Those modalities could be songs, photography books, poems, murals, blog posts, plays and improv theatre, and anything else that would positively uplift the stories of my participants in this study. I feel it is important for there to be various formats of my findings, so it is accessible for Black Christians outside of academia. Because this research is for them, and not the ivory tower. Thus, I need to make my findings in formats that any and everybody can access and process.

Final Thoughts

One Love…
One Heart…
Let's get together and feel alright
Hear the children crying (one love)
Hear the children crying (One Heart)
Saying: give thanks and praise to the Lord
And I will feel alright
Saying: let's get together and feel alright
One Love / People Get Ready by Bob Marley & The Wailers (1984)

It was an honor to do a study that was so rich and creative and that stretched my intellect, my aesthetic expertise, and my mind. It was beautiful to listen to my participants and observe

how they each opened up to me about their faith journey. Interestingly enough, I learned a lot from every one of my participants, and each participant pushed me to think about things differently. Through the soulful Sunday interview sessions with Haikoo, he taught me the importance of finding peace within myself and my spirituality. As he shared his experience of understanding his humanity in the midst of growing spiritually, I was taken aback by the wisdom he embodied. Through his spiritual journey, I learned that it is more than okay to have tough days (or tough weeks) where I do not carry out any of my spiritual practices. This does not mean that I am no longer spiritual or devoted to my spiritual growth; it just means I am human. And when this happens, I know I have to extend more grace to myself.

It took me a while to grasp what Anna meant by her "belonging to God and not the church." Through our multiple conversations, I was better able to understand her perspective and sit with the ways she orients to church and its teachings. Through those conversations, I learned that because Anna recognizes the humanity of the church and the pastor, she accepts that these "Godly" institutions and figures will have flaws, even if they are doing the "Lord's work." This is why it is imperative that she grows deeper in her personal relationship with God, so she can hear God's Divine Guidance and use that to carry out her spiritual journey rather than relying on what a pastor says.

Before conducting this research, Rev. Adon was the only person who I knew personally, though not that well. Although, I knew him prior to conducting this research, it is through this project that I got to know him more intimately. I resonated with them when they shared their experience of questioning their Christianity, and their coming to terms with their intuition and their spiritual calling. His story was quite inspiring to me. He has taught me that I should ask

questions and grapple with them as I grow in my faith, and that these questions should be welcomed in the church. The questions that I ask will assist me in growing deeper in my spiritual self and growing closer to the Divine. Moreover, they taught me that none of us have to accept our religion at face value. We should all seek for understanding in our faith. And Rev. Adon reminded me that I should not allow my fear of being judged by my sexuality and gender identity be the reason why I do not participate in Black church spaces. Because the Black church needs my political expertise and my insights. I commend him for being brave in how he shows up in those Black church spaces, because he is helping me to be brave too.

Renee's story was quite relatable to me because I too had to take some time away from church to better assess what I needed from my faith and from a space of worship. There is value in taking time away from church to readjust our spiritual selves, so we can better comprehend why we need our religion. Like Renee, I came to a point in my life that decided that I needed to build my *own* relationship with my religion and faith that was not tied to my parents. Once I did, I found myself wanting to grow deeper in it, and seek out ways in which to do that. Additionally, from Renee I learned that I need to keep putting in the work to grow my spirit. This is a continuous journey that has no destination, but the reward is that I grow deeper in my spirituality, which in turn, could lead to a greater sense of wholeness and contentment.

Something I learned from my participants and this study is that there is a fine line between tension, hurt, and trauma. As mentioned before, we all agree that tensions within our faith and religion is needed for us to grow. We can grow through our tensions and great things can come out of it. This meaning that not all tension is tied to hurt or trauma.

One Love, One Heart
Let's get together and feel alright

To my surprise, this study showed me that not every Black person has attended a church that celebrates their Blackness and Black history. My Black experience in church is truly one of a kind, which I was not expecting. In addition, I was surprised that every participant in this study has experienced church hurt and spiritual trauma. This deeply saddens me. I really wanted these experiences of trauma to not be so prevalent, but I also know that they are more frequent than I hoped. Moreover, I was not expecting for three of my participants to share with me that they attended churches that were deeply focused on money to the point that the pastor was embezzling funds from the church. And, I did not anticipate that each of our tensions with the Black church would touch tenets of white supremacy that is infused in our churches. Those tenets being greed and capitalism, expecting people to conform, and "punishing" those who decide not to; by silencing or ostracism them. This now makes me think about how many Black churches are aligned with white supremacy and do not even know it. This is definitely something to explore in future research.

Let's get together and feel alright.

After completing this study, I still have much hope for the Black church. It is going to take some time for majority of Black churches to be improved for the better, yet I feel like the transformation is happening. I see this transformation in the new age church I attended after leaving my home church, and I see it in the church that Rev. Adon is creating. It is interesting to note however that both these church spaces are not purely Christian. They are Christian based, but use the teachings and practices of other religions. I wonder if the Black church of the future would be centered around it being Christian based, but it primarily being interfaith. That would be something to explore in a future study. Also by conducting this research my complicated relationship with the church was validated. It was powerful to interview others who are also

wrestling with their ongoing struggles with the Black church, and finding ways to stay connected to it, despite their tensions. It is because of these participant's stories that I have hope and optimism in what the Black church can become in the next 10…20…30…50 years. However, something that is missing in this research is the voices of Generation Z. I would have loved to talked to someone from that generation and hear their thoughts about the Black church and their tensions. When I expand this study, I will definitely seek out those voices.

Saying: give thanks and praise to the Lord
And I will feel alright
Saying: let's get together and feel alright

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APPENDIX A: WRITING PROMPTS FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Beginnings and Belonging:

1. How was I introduced to the Black church?
2. What are my fondest memories of the Black church?
3. When did I feel like I most belonged to the Black church?

Tension and Conflict/Where am I Currently:

1. When did I begin to feel tension surrounding the Black church?
2. What caused the tension?
3. What did I do when I started to feel tension?
4. Why do I still remain in relationship with the Black church?
5. What is my current relationship with the Black church?
6. Where am I now with my faith journey?

Looking Forward:

1. How do I assess my faith journey?
2. Where do I hope to be in my faith journey?
3. What does it look like to have a tension-free relationship with my spirituality and religion?
4. Is it possible to have a tension-free relationship with my spirituality and religion?

Additional Writing Prompts:

1. In what ways do you, (your being, spirit, and soul) expand when you are in church? In what ways do you contract? How do you know when you are expanding or contracting? What sensations arise in your body?

2. How do you think growing up in the black church influenced your identity as an activist? In other words, how has it informed the way you "do" social justice work and present yourself in social justice spaces outside of the church?
3. How has growing up in the church influenced what blackness means for you and how has it transformed over time? Does the way you embody blackness change when you move outside of the walls of the church? How and why?
4. Imagine you have finished and published your dissertation. How do you imagine it is received by black church goers? How do you imagine it is received by black LGBTQ people who have a complicated history with the church? How do you respond to these two different groups?
5. Imagine you have finished and published your dissertation. Where do you see this research taking you in your career? What additional research or related topics would you want to pursue?

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Round One Interview Questions (Beginnings and Belonging)

1. How were you introduced to the Black church?
2. What are your fond memories of the Black church?
3. When did you feel like you most belonged to the Black church?
4. Which experiences in church most shaped who you are today?
5. How did the Black church influence your life path and journey?
6. How would you define your work in social justice?
7. Is there a gospel/Christian song that resonates with you? If so, what song?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your beginnings and belongings to the Black church I have yet to ask?

Round Two Interview Questions (Tension and Conflict/ Where you are Currently?)

1. What has stood out to you from the previous interview? Is there anything you wanted to further comment on or discuss?
2. When did you begin to feel tension within the Black church?
3. What caused the tension?
4. What are some of the issues you struggle with in the Black church?
5. What did you do when you started to feel the tension?
6. What were some initial strategies you used to navigate this tension?
7. Describe your current relationship with God. What does your ideal relationship with God look like? Where are you now with my faith journey?
8. Why do you still remain in relationship with the Black church?
9. Describe your current relationship with the Black church (like the institution itself).

Round Three Interview Questions (Looking Forward)

1. What has stood out to you from the previous two interviews? Is there anything you wanted to further comment on or discuss?
2. Where do you hope to be in your faith journey?
3. What does it look like to have a tension-free relationship with your spirituality and religion?
4. If you could, what would you do to make your church (or any Black church) a better place for worship?
5. How do you think growing up in the Black church influenced your identity in social justice work? How has it informed the way you "do" social justice work and present yourself in social justice spaces outside of the church?
6. How has growing up in the church influenced what Blackness means for you and how has it transformed over time? Does the way you embody Blackness change when you move outside the walls of the church? How and why?
7. What advice would you give to someone who is experiencing tension with their Black church?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that you have yet to mention from your last two interviews and from this interview you think would be valuable to know for this research?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: IT'S COMPLICATED": BLACK PEOPLE WHO ARE SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTED AND HAVE A TENSION-FILLED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BLACK CHURCH

Co- Principal Investigators: Josette Ferguson and Kathryn Hytten

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researcher, who's named on this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research project is to uplift the experiences and stories of Black community/political organizers and activists who have a current tension with the Black church, so the researcher can answer the following questions:

1. *Why do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church still stay a part of it?*
2. *How do Black people who are social justice oriented and have a tension-filled relationship with the Black church navigate these tension-filled relationships and stay a part of the church?*

The objectives of this study is to:

- Illuminate some reasons why Black community/ political organizers and activists have a

complicated relationship with the Black church.
- Uplift reasons why some Black community/ political organizers and activists stay apart of the Black church despite their tensions with the institution.
- Amplify the stories of Black community/ political organizers and activists, who have tensions with the Black church.
- Generate conversations among those in the Black church community to talk about how the church can be improved for the better.

Why are you asking me?
You have been selected to participate in this research because you are a North Carolina based Black community/political organizer, activist or advocate, who is 18 or older, has currently or once attended a predominately Black church and has a current tension with the Black church.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
Upon agreement to participate in this study, you will be interviewed three times virtually. All interviews will take place on Microsoft Teams and every interview will be recorded. Interviews may last between 60 to 90 minutes. The variation of time will depend on how each interview goes and whether there are topics that you want to engage in more or less. Also, these in-depth interviews will help the researcher get to know you further so that they can construct an accurate depiction of you and your experience with the Black church in their research. Since you will be discussing your tension-filled relationship with the Black church, emotions and stress may arise during each interview. Therefore, the researcher will provide space and time for you to collect yourself, and will lead embodiment exercises (breath work, body scans, visualization exercises, and other mindfulness activities) before each interview and upon your request. Also, at any point of time during any interview, you have the ability to skip questions and to stop the interview.

Following each interview, the researcher will send you a copy of the interview transcript and the notes they took during each interview. After interviews are completed, the researcher will construct a draft portraiture of your personal story. The portraiture will be a written depiction of your perspective and experience with the Black church. The researcher will attempt to capture the essence of your story and convey your perspective as you navigate your tensions with the Black church. This draft portraiture will be a culmination of the information gathered from your three interviews. Once we receive your approval of your portraiture, the research will be officially completed.

Is there any audio/video recording?
Every interview will be recorded. Recordings will be saved and stored in a secure location that will be password protected. The study team will be the only ones who has access to this location. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. During your interviews, you may feel intense feelings. These intense feelings may look like anger, frustration,

deep sadness, and embarrassment. In addition, since you will be sharing your personal and vulnerable stories with the researcher, this can put you at risk. Because this study contains questions about emotional distress and emotional distress may occur as a result of participating in this study, the study team can refer you to a license mental health professional if conversations become too overwhelming. Also, in order to minimize risk, the researcher will offer to lead embodiment exercises (i.e., breathing exercises) with participants before, during, and after your interviews, have you sign a consent form, and the researcher will conduct member checks throughout the entire research study.

Member checking is a way to invite in the participants of a research study to give critical feedback on their interview transcript and the researcher's data analysis to ensure that what the researcher has compiled resonates with the participant (Glense, 2016). The researcher plans to do member checks after each interview, after data analysis, and after your portrait is completed. For instance, after each interview a member check may look like the researcher sending an email to you with the full transcript of your interview along with their notes. In the days leading up to the next interview, the researcher will ask you to send them feedback on what was sent. Depending on the feedback, the researcher might revise your transcript or bring that information up in the next interview. For data analysis member checking might look like, the researcher sharing their research themes with you and you providing feedback. Based on your feedback, it may bring new insights and lenses to the data analysis. Once your portrait is completed, the researcher will share it with you for your feedback. Based on your responses, the researcher will edit and update your portrait. It is the utmost importance that your story be told the way you see fit, and the researcher wants to ensure that the best way they can.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact, Josette Ferguson, who can be reached at (336) 327-3585 or jrfergus@uncg.edu or Kathryn Hytten, who can be reached at (336) 334-3490 or kahytten@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

If you would like to talk to a mental health professional about any intense feelings that may arise during this research study, please contact Cyndi Aya, who can be reached at (919) 299-0970 or innerversation@gmail.com.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
Yes, there may be some benefits to society by you being a part of this study. You will be a part of a new frontier of research. Right now, there is hardly any research surrounding the tension-filled relationships of Black political/community activists and organizers and the Black church. This research will uplift the often-untold stories of those who have conflict with the Black church and hopefully provide insights in how to improve the Black church for the better.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you. After your last interview, you will be given a $25 visa gift card.

How will you keep my information confidential?
Before being interviewed, you can make the decision to be anonymous in this study or to have your real name used. The decision is solely yours. If you choose to remain anonymous in this study, a fictitious name will be provided to you unless you have one in mind. This name will be used throughout the entire research study. When data is disseminated (regardless of the use of a fictitious name or not) there will be no identifiable information used.

All recordings from interviews, master list, data analysis, and drafts will be stored in an UNCG approved data storage location outlined in the UNCG Data classification policy.

Currently, UNCG requires that data be stored for five years following closure of the study. Participant recordings and the master list will be destroyed at the completion the study.

Will my de-identified data be used in future studies?
Your de-identified data will be kept indefinitely and may be used for future research without your additional consent.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form/completing this survey/activity (used for an IRB-approved waiver of signature) you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly giving consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by Josette Ferguson.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES

Five to Seven Minute Breathing Exercise

* … represent short pauses of one to two seconds*

Close your eyes and get comfortable.

Sit with your feet planted on the ground, if you can.

Relax your shoulders and your arms.

Now, let's take some collective breaths together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Let's take two more collective breaths together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Let's take one more collective breath together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Now as we take deep breaths together,

Allow each breathe to make its way throughout your entire body.

Starting with your mouth and going all the way to your toes,

Be one with your breath.

Let each breath grow you closer to your body.

Let's begin with five deep breaths.

I'll count to five for each one.

Remember to breathe in and out of your mouth as we inhale and exhale.

Let's begin…

Inhale. One…Two…Three…Four…Five… Exhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five.

Again.

Inhale. One…Two…Three…Four…Five… Exhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five.

Three more breaths.

Inhale One…Two…Three…Four…Five…Exhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five.

Two more.

Inhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five… Exhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five.

Last breath.

Inhale One…Two…Three…Four…Five…Exhale…One…Two…Three…Four…Five.

Before we open our eyes,

Let's do three more deep breaths.

Continue to feel these breaths throughout your entire body.

We will inhale for five seconds,

Hold for three seconds.

And then exhale for five seconds.

Remember to breathe in and out of your mouth.

Let's begin.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Two more deep breathes.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Last breathe.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Open your eyes when you are ready.

Seven Minute Body Scan Breathing Exercise

* … represent short pauses of one to two seconds*

Close your eyes and get comfortable.

Sit with your feet planted on the ground, if you can.

Relax your shoulders and your arms.

Now, let's take some collective breaths together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Let's take two more collective breaths together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Let's take one more collective breath together.

Breathe in through your mouth for five seconds…one…two…three…four…five.

Hold for three seconds…one…two….three

Breathe out your mouth for five seconds… one…two…three…four…five.

Now let's sit with what we are feeling.

Just sit with the feelings and sensations in your body.

Do not judge it.

Just notice the sensations.

After I mention each region, I'll give you a few seconds to notice.

Remember we are not passing judgement.

We are just noticing.

Let's begin with your toes…are they cold…Maybe sweating?...

Now your legs…how do they feel?...

Next your stomach…are you feeling any tightness or discomfort?...

Remember to notice…do not pass judgement.

Let's move to your chest…is it heavy? Is it tight? Is it light?…

Now your shoulders…are they raised? Are they tense? Are they relaxed?...

Next, how are your arms…what sensations are you feeling?...

Remember to notice…do not pass judgement.

What about your hands…are they sweating…Are they tense?...

Let's go to your back…is it tight? Is it loose?...

Remember to notice the sensations…

Do not judge, just notice…

Now onto your neck…how does it feel…

Lastly, let's focus on your head…

Are there any thoughts that are racing……

Remember to just notice and observe.

Do not judge……..

Before we open our eyes,

Let's do three collective breaths together.

Breathe in and out of your mouth,

And feel these breaths throughout your entire body.

We will inhale for five seconds,

Hold for three seconds.

And then exhale for five seconds.

Let's begin.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Two more deep breathes.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Last breathe.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Open your eyes when you are ready.

Five Minute Visualization Exercise

* … represent short pauses of one to two seconds*

Close your eyes and take a deep breath.

Get comfortable.

Sit with your feet planted on the ground, if you can.

Relax your mind and body……

Let's go on a journey together…

Drift off to the place that brings you comfort and provides you peace……

It may be on a lavish boat in the middle of a vast calm ocean.

Or on the sands of a luxurious tropical resort.

Or maybe at the top of a snowy mountain in a cozy log cabin.

Wherever your peace is…go to it…

Visualize it….

Now get comfortable with this space…

Take in the sights…

Take in the sounds and smells…

What do you see……

What do you hear……

What do you smell……

What do you feel……

Is there anyone with you?.....

Are you alone?.....

Sit with the feelings and sensations that are coming up…

Now let's take another deep breath…In….and…out…

Before we open our eyes,

Let's do three collective breaths together.

Breathe in and out of your mouth.

And feel these breaths throughout your entire body.

We will inhale for five seconds,

Hold for three seconds.

And then exhale for five seconds.

Let's begin.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Two more deep breathes.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Last breathe.

Breathe in…One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Hold for three seconds…One…Two…Three…

Breathe out… One…Two…Three…Four…Five…

Open your eyes when you are ready.

APPENDIX E: STYLISTIC CHOICES USED IN FOUND POEMS

⇒ For the most part, whenever I use *right alignment with italics* - that notes my participant' thoughts.

⇒ The middle alignment is for a "meeting in the middle" or emphasizing what a pastor had said or connecting what was said on the left alignment to the right alignment.

⇒ There is no specific significance with using the left alignment - this usually is just the norm and is a standard for writing.

⇒ Whenever, I repeat a word over and over - that is for emphasis.

⇒ Depending on the repeated word - I might keep in a straight line or a slant line from left to right. Whenever I put it in a slanted line, I want to create a slight pause between each word. When it is in a straight line, it's meant to be read a little bit faster.

⇒ I use *italics* to slow down tempo when reading and place emphasis on each syllable. For instance, if the word is *flow* - I want you to slowly read that word. So that *slows* down reading a phrase or a sentence.

⇒ I **bold words** so they are said louder. If a phrase is **bolded and underlined.** I want that to be said louder. If a word or phrase i**s *bolded, underlined, and italicized*** then I want this to be read louder, and slowed down.

⇒ I underline words to just note a difference in the sentence and to create a slight emphasis on the word.

⇒ When I indent a phrase under a phrase,
I am just denoting that the phrases are connected.

⇒ When I am playing around with the spacing around words, that is to create emphasis around the first word that was spaced out. Also, I might be using spacing to really highlight the meaning of a word. Like here, I am trying to highlight the meaning of space.

⇒ There are places in many of the poems where there is parenthesis around an action. Feel free to act this action out.

*Author's note. The words that are underlined, bolded, and italicized can be read together, which makes another poem within the poem.

APPENDIX F: "IT'S COMPLICATED" DISSERTATION PLAYLIST

1. *Revolution* by Kirk Franklin

2. *Lift Every Voice And Sing* by Melinda Doolittle

3. *Shackles* by Mary Mary

4. *I Need You To Survive* by Hezekiah Walker & The Love Fellowship

5. *Get Your Glory (Live)* by Anna Golden & Todd Galberth

6. *Trust in God (Radio Version)* by Elevation Worship

7. *Just a Prayer Away* by Yolanda Adams

8. *Losing Religion* by Kirk Franklin

9. *Samadhi by* Londrelle

10. *It's Working* by William Murphy

11. *One Love / People Get Ready* by Bob Marley & The Wailers

12. *Grateful* by Hezekiah Walker & The Love Fellowship

13. *Your Power* by Lecrae & Tasha Cobbs Leonard

14. *Let the Church Say Amen (feat. Marvin Winans) (Radio Edit) by Andrae Crouch*

If you would like to listen to this playlist, click here.

APPENDIX G: MY ORIGINAL SONG, *GOTTA CHANGE UP*

Ad Libs

Dr. J on the track
Ye-ye-ye-ye-ye-ye-YEAH

Sean!
I gotta thank you for this track man

It's so lit!

Thank you to my committee and my professors
I wouldn't be here without y'all

Many thanks
To my ancestors, family, friends,
The Divine
For holding me down

And thank you
To my participants
For sharing y'all stories
Y'all the real ones

So, let's get into it

Chorus (4x)

We Need the Church
But it gotta change up
Gotta change up

Verse

You See the Black church,
Is a place
of resistance
Of Black politics,
Black culture,
Black excellence

No matter
How far I go
From the institution

It’s in my blood
Yet
I’m seeking restitution

You know,
my participants and I
Were hurt
By the church
Traumatized at church
by pastor’s
And it’s people

We still stand by it though
‘Cuz we know, what the church means
For - Black people

We love the church
We love the worship
We love the music
But it’s the pastor
and it’s some people

I don’t want the politicking

I don’t want the gossiping

I don’t want the shaming

I don’t want to conform

I just want to show up
And worship God

I want to be myself
While I worship God

I don’t want to hurt
To worship God

We don’t want to hurt
To worship God

This why the church
Gotta change it up