

Tamelyn N. Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011). xix + 255 pp. \$39.95 hardback.

Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs has written what she calls “the only comprehensive study of the black megachurch to date” (4). While this may be partly true, even she admits to having a narrow focus and she calls for more research on black megachurches to determine where they fit into the broader contexts of black churches and black politics in America. She addresses three essential questions based on Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 sermon “A Knock at Midnight.” First, “Are black megachurches answering the knock at midnight?” Second, “Are they attempting to provide the social and political bread that black communities need?” Third, “Are they trying to provide the ‘bread of freedom’ or economic justice that King spoke of?” (3). In short, her answer is sort of.

She argues that some black megachurches engage public life in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. But throughout the book she emphasizes that, like African American churches in general, black megachurches are not a monolith and do not all participate in public engagement activities. She contends that churches that engage public life most likely have a prophetic theological orientation, emphasize the social gospel over the prosperity gospel, have communal rather than privatistic outlooks, and come from certain denominations. The three most common types of public engagement are electoral politics, protest politics, and community development. Her study focuses on black megachurch community development organizations (BMCDOs).

In contrast to traditional community development corporations (CDCs), BMCDOs are more likely to have women executive directors and take a more comprehensive approach to public engagement, focusing on nontraditional social service activities and not just housing programs. Furthermore, women-led BMCDOs are more likely to “foster social capital,” have more women on their staffs, and “have a more flexible and collaborative management style” (150). Tucker-Worgs maintains that the positions these women take in black megachurches reflect their historic roles as leaders of public engagement activities in African American churches in general. The difference between many African American churches and black megachurches, she contends, is that the megachurches are willing to give women public leadership roles in their churches and community development efforts, thereby acknowledging the work that African American women have been doing in public engagement activities all along.

Furthermore, she argues that CDOs allow black megachurches to answer the knock at midnight and serve as a symbol that their churches are activist churches. These CDOs seek to address the social and economic challenges that African Americans continue to face despite the strides made through half a century of electoral and protest politics. African Americans continue to struggle with high unemployment, poor education systems, and inadequate housing and health care. The broader range of services that CDOs provide compared to traditional CDCs allows black megachurches to meet more needs and reach more people. The BMCDOs show that the church is committed to community involvement, which appeals to people who want to join a church with an “activist” mission.

Tucker-Worgs concludes that not all black megachurches answer the knock at midnight. Churches that have a color-blind theology, emphasize the prosperity gospel, are

nondenominational, and have a privitistic rather than a communal emphasis are least likely to participate in public engagement activities. The churches that participate in these activities do so in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. She cautions that BMCDOs risk losing their prophetic voice because they often get funding from governmental sources. Churches that critique politicians or government policies might find it difficult to get government funding for their CDOs and may, consequently, choose not to use their prophetic voice to hold leaders and institutions accountable. She also maintains that fissures in contemporary black politics were evident in the first three presidential elections of the twenty-first century, which, she claims, further reveal the diversity and the limitations of BMCDOs.

This book sheds important light on the role that black megachurches have played in promoting community development among African Americans in recent years. It is not a comprehensive study of black megachurches, but it provides a description of how public engagement activities have evolved over the past half-century and an assessment of their impact on African American communities. Tucker-Worgs rightly emphasizes the diverse nature of black megachurches, and the political and theological orientations she ascribes to them provide a nice framework for understanding that diversity.

The "ITC/Faith Communities Today Project 2000 Megachurch" upon which she bases many of her conclusions is a good start for future research on black megachurches. Based on telephone surveys of pastors and assistant pastors, it offers a "top down" perspective of the role that black megachurches play in contemporary black politics and black churches in general. Her emphasis on the unique role that women play in black megachurches is an important line of inquiry that should be pursued in future studies. Women's leadership of BMCDOs has clearly shaped the function and mission of community development. It would be interesting to know how women's leadership in black megachurches has shaped the vision of those churches. Overall, Tucker-Worgs should be commended for her enlightening critique of BMCDOs and for leading scholars down the path of future research into this important phenomenon in African American churches and megachurches in general.

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