

## The Sociopolitical Role of the Black Church in Post–Civil Rights Era America

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### INTRODUCTION

“The Black Church Is Dead.” This provocative headline appeared in the Huffington Post on February 24, 2010.<sup>1</sup> The author of the essay that followed was Eddie S. Glaude Jr., a professor of religion at Princeton University and author and co-editor of several influential books in the field of African American religious history. In his brief “online” essay, Glaude made the point that “the idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.” He went on to say that the standard view that prophetic energies were an inherent part of black churches was a myth and the reality was that “all too often black churches and those who pastor them have been and continue to be quite conservative” on sociopolitical issues. What is behind his argument was his deep apprehension that the prophetic tradition of the Black Church was waning.<sup>2</sup> Glaude lamented that “rare are those occasions when black churches mobilize in public and together to call attention to the pressing issues of our day. . . . Where are the press conferences and impassioned efforts around black children living in poverty, and commercials and organizing around jobs and healthcare reform?” His ending, however, was a call

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for the resurrection of the Black Church: “Black churches and preachers must find their prophetic voices in this momentous present.”

Glaude’s obituary for the Black Church, or otherwise his jeremiad, ignited intense debate. Within two weeks, a panel of leading scholars of African American religion published their comments and reflections on the Religion Dispatches website.<sup>3</sup> Other interpreters of the Black Church responded on different websites. Some sharply criticized the headline as “deceptive,” others assailed his very right to criticize on the ground that he was raised a Roman Catholic and was outside the family of the historic Black Church. Still others, however, gave him credit for stirring discussion. This resulted in a roundtable discussion on October 21, 2010, sponsored by the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University, in which prominent scholars and clergy, including Glaude himself, engaged in serious discussion about the future of the Black Church in America.<sup>4</sup>

As provocative as the headline was, the debate over the nature of the Black Church is not new. Since W. E. B. Du Bois pointed out the centrality of the Black Church in the African American community at the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of the Black Church has been largely centered on one defining question: Does the Black Church encourage or discourage sociopolitical activism among African Americans? Scholars of the first half of the twentieth century such as Benjamin E. Mays, Joseph W. Nicolson, Gunnar Myrdal, and Franklin E. Frazier tended to characterize black churches of the time as priestly, other-worldly, and accommodative.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, scholars of the 1960s and ‘70s such as Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen, James H. Cone, and Vincent Harding, inspired by black churches’ social activism as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement, illuminated the prophetic, this-worldly, and resistant tradition of the Black Church.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars such as Gayraud S. Wilmore observed that the Black Church had been simultaneously “the most reactionary” and “the most radical” institution.<sup>7</sup> In 1990, a more comprehensive analytical perspective was offered by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, who emphasized the necessity to comprehend black churches as being involved “in a dynamic series of dialectical tensions” between polarities such as priestly versus prophetic, other-worldly versus this-worldly, and accommodative versus resistant.<sup>8</sup>

The magnitude of controversy that Glaude’s essay stirred is a sure indication that the role of the Black Church in contemporary America needs

to be examined. Indeed, since the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, there have been tremendous social changes in the African American community. The end of legalized racism has opened the possibility for African Americans to reach unprecedented levels of access to mainstream politics. On the other hand, it has produced polarization between the black middle class and the black poor. The post-civil rights era has also witnessed the rise of movements addressing other sociopolitical issues such as women's rights and homosexuals' rights. In short, the Black Church in the post-civil rights era has increasingly come under pressure as to whether it can effectively address the issues of class, gender, and sexuality as well as race.

Compared to a substantial number of studies on the activism of the Black Church during the civil rights movement, studies on the role of the Black Church in the post-civil rights era have been limited, although case studies have been increasing in number. Lincoln and Mamiya's nationwide survey of 2,150 black churches, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990), still stands as the most valuable source for understanding the contemporary Black Church. Another important source is the collection of essays based on the nationwide survey of 1,956 black churches conducted by faculty members at Morehouse College, which resulted in the two-volume report *New Day Begun* (2003) and *Long March Ahead* (2004).<sup>9</sup> In addition to these two sociological studies, Anthony B. Pinn's social analysis with ethnographic information, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (2002),<sup>10</sup> serves as another important source for an overview of sociopolitical issues surrounding the contemporary Black Church. It is expected that these studies will be complemented by other studies that include more historical, political, and theological perspectives.

In this article I explore the contours of the sociopolitical role of the Black Church in the post-civil rights era. Keeping Lincoln and Mamiya's dialectical model in mind, special attention is given to three aspects of the contemporary Black Church. The first section examines factors that have contributed to the overall decline in social activism in the post-civil rights era. The second section observes contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. The third section discusses the relationship between the Black Church and unchurched black youth in inner cities.

## I. THE BLACK CHURCH AND ITS SOCIOPOLITICAL LEADERSHIP

### A. Sociopolitical Concerns of the Black Church

Compared to the Black Church involvement in the civil rights movement, it is generally accepted that the activism of the Black Church in sociopolitical issues since the 1960s has declined. Although this assessment is generally correct, it is not always understood why this should be so. One explanation could be that the Black Church has lost interest in sociopolitical issues. This explanation has some validity given that a new theological trend known as “the prosperity gospel” has become increasingly influential in black churches. At present, however, a lack of interest cannot be considered to be the leading cause of the decline of sociopolitical activism in the Black Church, since other surveys show just the opposite result. Lincoln and Mamiya wrote in 1990:

A general conclusion that can be drawn from the results of several surveys over a twenty-year period is that there is a broad support and consensus in the black community, both within and without the churches, among clergy and laity, for a social prophecy role for black churches. The attitude is pervasive that the churches should be involved in and express their views on everyday social and political issues.<sup>11</sup>

The general trend has continued up to the present. According to the Pew Research Center Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007, six out of ten African Americans (61%) said that “houses of worship should express their views on social and political matters.” The percentage was higher than that of whites, among whom 45 percent responded the same way.<sup>12</sup>

In connection with the general trend, it is equally important to identify the types of issues that black churches have regarded as important. The nationwide survey by faculty members at Morehouse College (2004) reveals that black churches have given priority to racial justice issues (civil rights, affirmative action, and criminal justice) and socioeconomic development issues (including public welfare and public education), both considered to be the continuation of what the civil rights movement addressed. The survey also shows that relatively less attention has been paid to the issue of women’s rights.<sup>13</sup> The implications derived from the survey are that black churches still have a potential to be mobilized around the cause of racial justice as well as socioeconomic development issues but that they have less potential to be mobilized around gender issues.

## B. Decline of Black Church Leadership

If the Black Church's lack of interest in these issues is not the leading cause of declining involvement, what factors have diminished the social activism of the Black Church in the post-civil rights era? Based on the studies I have mentioned, three equally important factors can be pointed out. First, as R. Drew Smith argues, is "the lack of consensus since the civil rights movement about an African American public policy agenda."<sup>14</sup> During the civil rights movement, a broad consensus at the national level existed as to a civil rights agenda: obtaining legal equality. In contrast, the sociopolitical issues that the contemporary African American community is facing have diversified and fragmented into such issues as education, housing, jobs, crime, women's rights, and homosexual rights. Consequently, social activism has increasingly become locally oriented, focusing on specific issues that local communities are facing. With this shift, the social activism of the Black Church has also become locally tied to specific issues, which have contributed to the invisibility of the Black Church leadership at the national level.

Second, as Allison Calhoun-Brown explains, the decreased activism is related to lower church attendance on the part of African Americans since the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> An article by Andres Tapia in 1996 reported that whereas a generation ago as many as 80 percent of blacks went to church, that figure was currently as low as 40 percent.<sup>16</sup> Although this figure may be too low, it still captures the general trend. The Pew Research Survey in 2007 reported that the percentage of African Americans who went to church at least once a week was 53 percent.<sup>17</sup>

However, pointing out lower church attendance is not enough. According to Anthony B. Pinn, a more accurate picture of church attendance since the 1970s includes both the surge in membership on the part of the black middle class and, at the same time, the decline in membership on the part of poor blacks, especially male youth.<sup>18</sup> For the black middle class, who have successfully entered mainstream society but have been placed in a position where they need to work and compete with whites, the Black Church has been a stabilizing force, enabling them to confirm their roots and maintain their self-identity as "black." Since the black middle class has overcome poverty and come to live in the suburbs with better education, housing, jobs, and health care, many no longer have pressing sociopolitical issues. Consequently, they have tended to expect black churches to be spiritual sanctuaries rather than agents for social

change. In contrast, in the eyes of poor blacks, especially inner-city male youth, black churches have become irrelevant for addressing the social conditions surrounding them. The irony is that the unchurched have come disproportionately from these people, while the social conditions of inner cities have been precisely the issues that the contemporary Black Church should address. The simultaneous process of surge and decline in church attendance, the former for the black middle class and the latter for poor blacks, has contributed to the diminishment of the Black Church's capacity to provide effective leadership on sociopolitical issues.

Third, as scholars say, the Black Church no longer is "the only" or "the most important" social institution in the African American community.<sup>19</sup> We should remember that the active involvement of black churches in the civil rights movement came about because so many other channels of activity outside the church were closed, especially in the South. The end of legalized racism, however, dramatically expanded the participation of African Americans in politics. For example, whereas the number of black elected officials was approximately one hundred in 1965, the number in 2002 was more than nine thousand.<sup>20</sup> This has enabled African Americans to address their grievances through the political process. As Smith explains, the prevailing tactical paradigm within black politics has also shifted from direct-action protest in the 1960s to electoral politics since then.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the number of black advocacy organizations at national, state, and local levels has dramatically increased since the 1960s. They have provided African Americans with yet another channel through which they can address sociopolitical issues. Therefore, it could be said that the rise of black politicians and of black advocacy organizations has undermined the traditional Black Church hegemony in sociopolitical affairs.

The overall decline of the Black Church's sociopolitical leadership, however, does not mean that black churches have ceased to play any role in sociopolitical affairs. It can be said that black churches and black politicians complement each other in that the black churches are able to position themselves outside the circle of the mainstream political system to address issues that mainstream politics, which is oriented to the middle class, tends to overlook, such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, education, shelter, food, and crime prevention. In a similar way, black churches and black advocacy organizations complement each other in that black churches collaborate with the organizations and make an impact on policymakers.

According to Pinn, many regional councils across denominational lines and many local churches are working to address some of the health-care problems facing African Americans.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, another survey suggests that only a small minority of black churches appear to have been decidedly active in these sociopolitical matters.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, on the national level, advocacy organizations such as the Congress of National Black Churches, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition led by Jesse Jackson, and the National Action Network led by Al Sharpton are all supported by activist black clergy. On the other hand, the passivity of black clergy has been also documented. Smith draws a conclusion from his survey that it seems that “only a small minority of African American churches can be considered as extensively involved with activist organizations.”<sup>24</sup> These seemingly contradictory survey results suggest that contemporary black churches are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions over their sociopolitical leadership.

## II. THE BLACK CHURCH AND ISSUES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

### A. Sexism in the Black Church

Sexism has emerged as a new challenge for the contemporary Black Church to overcome. An especially controversial issue is the full ordination of women as clergy. Just as with Christian churches in general, the Black Church has traditionally assumed the pulpit as “men’s space” and the pew as “women’s place.”<sup>25</sup> While black women have made up about 66–80 percent of the Black Church membership, it is estimated as of 2005 that approximately 12 percent of ordained clergy are women.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, women have performed various roles in the Black Church as evangelists, missionaries, deaconesses, Sunday school teachers, musicians, choir members and directors, ushers, recreation leaders, and the like. Women have occasionally had opportunities to preach, although in a nonordained status. However, ordained status is required if one wants to exercise other pastoral functions such as performing the sacraments.

Why has the Black Church been hesitant about women’s ordination? First, the historical context needs to be considered. As Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson point out, “the black church provides a protected space for black men to enjoy the patriarchal privileges of maleness, which are denied to them in a white patriarchal society.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, becoming a clergyman was historically a primary route for black males

to enjoy “manhood.” Slavery deprived black males of opportunities to participate in politics and to become the mainstay of a family, both of which were traits associated with “manhood” in the mainstream white culture. Under slavery, slave preachers were recognized as having attained the highest advancement in life and were the most respected persons within slave communities. After emancipation, the Black Church was the primary and, in many cases, the only black social institution in both the North and the South. Power and authority inevitably were assumed by clergymen. In both Northern and Southern cities where black churches were owned and controlled by African Americans, black clergy were economically independent from white power structures. As a result, they could position themselves to exercise middle-class values.

Second, hesitancy concerning women’s ordination has to do with biblical interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Black clergy who disapprove of women’s ordination often refer to the absence of women among the twelve disciples and cite the following biblical passages: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God” (1 Corinthians 11:3); and “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34). In contrast, black clergy who approve women’s ordination often cite other biblical passages such as “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Some refer to the centrality of women to Jesus’ ministry such as the work of his mother, the women who stood by at his crucifixion, and the woman who was the first to witness his resurrection. In short, the Bible could be interpreted in both ways. Most black clergy, however, have read the Bible through a patriarchal framework, paying attention to the former mentioned biblical passages but overlooking the latter.

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was the first to adopt the policy of fully ordaining women in 1894, but women’s ordination did not take place in any other black denominations until the mid-twentieth century. Among other black denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention (NBC), and the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) began to ordain women in 1948, 1954, 1965, and 1967, respectively.<sup>29</sup> Yet support varies along denomination lines. In Lincoln and Mamiya’s nationwide survey, about 90 percent of black Methodists respondents approved of women as clergy, whereas the

approval rate in the case of NBC respondents and PNBC respondents were 26.5 percent and 42.7 percent, respectively. In the case of the Church of God in Christ, the largest black Pentecostal denomination, the approval rate was 26.6 percent.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, according to Sandra L. Barnes, “even among supportive churches, emphasis on addressing social and racially based inequities often results in the omission of gender issues such as women clergy, or relegates the topic to secondary importance.”<sup>31</sup>

In the field of theology, commitment to overcome sexism has come especially from those who advocate womanist theology. The word “womanist” was first used by African American novelist Alice Walker. In her 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker suggested that black women had historically been concerned not only for their own welfare but also for that of their entire family and community.<sup>32</sup> The best illustration is the life of Harriet Tubman. After she escaped from slavery to the North, Tubman returned to the South nineteen times to rescue her family and other slaves. Walker described black women’s orientation that is characterized by concern for wholeness with the word “womanist.”

Womanist theologians have used black women’s historical experiences as the primary source for their theological thinking and have tried to connect Christian faith with overcoming the triple discrimination of racism, sexism, and classism. Black liberation theology, articulated by James H. Cone in the late 1960s, insisted that God is concerned with the liberation of the oppressed, most especially “black people” in the context of U.S. history.<sup>33</sup> Womanist theologians have taken Cone’s discussion one step further and insisted that God is concerned with the liberation of “black women,” since they are “the poorest of the poor” and “the least of these.” However, as Mark L. Chapman argues, because their experience encompasses racism, sexism, and classism, womanist theologians believe that black women’s reality must be connected to the liberation of every person and, for that reason, they emphasize the need to produce constant dialogue to challenge all oppressive forces.<sup>34</sup> As Pinn notes, womanist theology’s “long-term impact on the black church remains uncertain.”<sup>35</sup> However, coupled with the growing number of seminary-trained women and the existence of other black feminist organizations, it is expected that womanist theology will gradually make a positive impact on black churches.

## B. Homophobia in the Black Church

Few issues have been treated as negatively as that of sexuality in the contemporary Black Church. Prejudice against homosexuals and a tendency to regard sexuality as a taboo topic persist in the Black Church to this day, as evidenced in the Pew Research Survey of 2007. In that survey, 64 percent of black Christians voiced opposition to same-sex marriage, significantly higher than their white Christian counterparts (50%).<sup>36</sup>

Two major factors are worth considering as to why the Black Church has been hesitant to accept homosexuals openly and to discuss the issue of sexuality honestly. First, the discussion of sexuality in the Black Church has been centered on “manhood” and “womanhood.” Slavery robbed many black males and females of opportunities to exercise responsibilities traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity. In many cases, they could control neither their own bodies nor their social and family relationships. After emancipation, black bodies continued to be exploited in the imagination of white Americans, who stereotyped the black male and the black female with sexual innuendo, such as “Beast” and “Jezebel,” respectively. Consequently, the Black Church in the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century promoted their congregations to abide by strict sexual norms and to model socially accepted forms of family so that black people could earn respectability in racist white society. This, in turn, made the Black Church shun honest discussion of sexuality and pay attention exclusively to concepts of manhood and womanhood. In the late twentieth century, sociological studies, such as the 1965 Moynihan report,<sup>37</sup> raised an alert over the high rate of black family breakup in decaying inner cities. A subsequent argument of these studies was that the primary cause of black family breakup was the absence of responsible black males. Influenced by these studies, the Black Church has tended to take a stance that the solution rests on whether black males could restore their manhood as responsible fathers.<sup>38</sup> Given this context, it would not be surprising if the Black Church has given a great deal of attention to the issues of manhood and womanhood.

Second, hesitation to accept homosexuals openly has to do with biblical interpretation.<sup>39</sup> Black Christians who show homophobia often cite the following biblical passages as a sign that the Bible opposes homosexuality: “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination” (Leviticus 18:22); “If a man also lie with mankind . . . they

shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:13); and “And likewise also the men . . . burn with lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet” (Romans 1:27). In contrast, as Pinn explains, some black Christians who support homosexual rights argue that biblical passages used to condemn homosexuality were developed in a particular cultural and historical context so that it is not doctrinally mandatory that the Church condemn homosexuality as sin. Others argue that although Jesus spoke out against many forms of sin, homosexuality is not listed as sin anywhere in his recorded words.<sup>40</sup> In short, the Bible could be interpreted in both ways. The Black Church for the most part, however, has read it through patriarchal and heterosexual frameworks, paying attention to the former passages but neglecting the latter.

It is important to note that there have been efforts to overcome the Black Church’s conservative stance on the issue of homosexuality. Various religious organizations on national, regional, and local levels as well as at seminaries have set up forums and developed programs to change the homophobic attitude of the Black Church.<sup>41</sup> Although the Black Church has softened its position on homosexuality, the fact remains that it is far more difficult for openly homosexual persons to be ordained as clergy than it is for women. Scholars point out that the Black Church’s attitude of avoiding honest discussion of the issue of sexuality is a cause of its inability to take sufficient leadership in tackling the prevention of HIV/AIDS, which has been spreading among black youth.<sup>42</sup> It is imperative for the Black Church to address issues of sexuality honestly if it is to maintain its social relevancy.

### III. THE BLACK CHURCH AND ISSUES OF CLASS

#### A. The Black Church and Black Youth in the Inner City

One of the most pressing issues for the Black Church today is that a growing number of black youth, especially males, have lost contact with the Black Church. This phenomenon is especially salient in the inner cities. Lincoln and Mamiya pointed out in 1990 that, for the first time, there was a large proportion of black teenagers and young adults who had no knowledge of and no respect for the Black Church and its traditions.<sup>43</sup> During the 1960s, black preachers like Martin Luther King Jr. called for black churches to identify themselves with the suffering of the

urban poor and address economic justice for them. Since the 1970s, however, the leadership of the Black Church seems to have declined. What factors have caused this trend? Why have many black male youths seen the Black Church as irrelevant for them?

Lincoln and Mamiya point out structural factors.<sup>44</sup> First, there are 18–25 percent less black men than women nationally between the ages of seventeen and forty-five. This ratio of male and female has some impact on black male church membership. Second, in the inner cities, black male youths are more likely to become victims of crimes and to lose their life and also to suffer a high incarceration rate. These circumstances have deprived black male youth of opportunities to participate in the Black Church.

However, there are psychological factors as well. Three factors should be considered. First, black male youth tend to view the Black Church as an institution for the middle class. As noted previously, the Black Church is important for the black middle class because it enables them to feel black cultural ties. For the first generation that moved to the suburbs after the civil rights movement, their home churches were still in the inner cities. They commuted to their home churches from the suburbs on Sundays for worship and fellowship. For the currently growing second generation, however, suburban churches are preferred, and many no longer commute to their traditional churches in the inner cities. Faced with the loss of membership and financial difficulties, a growing number of large black churches have left the inner cities for the suburbs. As a result, although there are still some large churches in city centers that attract commuters from the suburbs, most of the churches remaining in the inner cities today are small, mostly Pentecostal storefront churches that serve the very poor and attract older members. The exodus of the large black churches to the suburbs has produced a gradual loss of various services that those black churches had once offered beyond class boundaries to the inner-city poor such as shelter, food, and medical services. The major trend, which some scholars call “the suburbanization” of the Black Church, gives black male youth a negative impression that the Black Church is leaving them behind.<sup>45</sup>

Second, black male youth are more likely to be attracted to the Nation of Islam, a black Islamic movement committed to improving the spiritual, mental, social, and economic conditions of black people. Founded in 1930 by Wallace D. Fard, then led by Elijah Muhammad from 1934 to 1975, and presently led by Louis Farrakhan, the NOI has continued

to appeal to black male youth as an alternative to the Black Church. Two major reasons can be pointed out for this. First, the NOI actively recruits disadvantaged black male youths on the street or in prison, people whom black churches tend to overlook. Second, the NOI's doctrines, such as that of black people as "the original men," its patriarchal stance, and practice of self-defense techniques are seen to be more militant attitudes than those of the Black Church in the eyes of inner-city black male youth.<sup>46</sup>

Third, in connection with the second factor, black male youth in inner cities tend to see the Black Church as a "feminized" institution. A scholar points out that women are not only dominant in black churches but church programs and worship styles such as "sewing circles and teas" are oriented toward women. Moreover, while black male youth hear love and nonviolence preached in church, once they step out into the street, "just the opposite character traits are necessary for survival."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the message of the Black Church does not appeal to them. Many black male youths in the inner cities today see the Black Church as irrelevant because it appears to them as a "feminized" religious institution.

How could the Black Church win the trust of black male youth in inner cities? The answers drawn from the above discussion are these: First, it needs to remove the impression that it is an institution for women. This, however, is a complicated task. To that end, the Black Church needs to emphasize "masculinity." But what kind of "masculinity" should it be? Moreover, while the growth of ordained women clergy is a welcome sign for the empowerment of women in the Black Church, this may give black male youth the impression that the Black Church is becoming a more feminized institution. In short, what is required for the Black Church today is simultaneously to promote a greater role for women in church leadership, on the one hand, and to show that it is not a "feminized" institution, on the other hand. The Black Church needs to solve this dilemma if it wants to win the trust of inner-city black male youth.

Second, the Black Church needs to identify itself with the suffering of the black poor. To that end, the kind of ministry exemplified by Eugene F. Rivers III is required.<sup>48</sup> Rivers is the pastor of the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester, one of Boston's most violent neighborhoods. He formed the Ten Point Coalition in 1992 after he saw a tragedy at one Baptist church in an inner-city neighborhood in Boston. During a funeral for a gang member, members of a rival gang entered the church and stabbed a gang member multiple times. The incident

convinced Rivers of the church's failure, and he organized the Coalition to respond to the crisis. The Coalition adopted various strategies including educating and mobilizing the community, identifying and building a relationship with youth, intervening and defusing gang conflict, and providing youth programs that promote avoidance of violence and gang involvement. Needless to say, to win trust from inner-city black youth invited extreme risk. Rivers's house was hit by stray bullets in 1991, and it was again shot at in 1994 by a crack dealer whom he had tried to rehabilitate. Nevertheless, Rivers stayed in the neighborhood, insisting that "dramatic change will always require dramatic sacrifices." The Coalition developed into an organization consisting of thirty-seven churches and agencies in the Boston area in 1996 and has been expanding since then.<sup>49</sup> Rivers's commitment clearly shows that the prophetic tradition in the Black Church has lived on, and this type of leadership is required for the Black Church to restore the trust of inner-city black youth.

#### B. The Black Church and the Prosperity Gospel

No discussion of the role of the contemporary Black Church is adequate without taking up the controversy over the prosperity gospel. Robert M. Franklin characterize the prosperity gospel as "the single greatest threat" to the Black Church's prophetic tradition.<sup>50</sup> Fredrick C. Harris characterize the tension between the prophetic tradition and the prosperity gospel as "a theological civil war" and explains that the tension reflects "fundamental differences in how black churches should go about eradicating racial inequality in American society."<sup>51</sup> What is the prosperity gospel? What implications does it have for the problems of inner-city black youth?

As of 2008, there are roughly 1,300 megachurches in the United States. A megachurch can be defined as having a weekly attendance of two thousand or more.<sup>52</sup> Although not all megachurches have these characteristics, they generally have some of the following features: First, many megachurches are nondenominational. The worship arena holds several thousands to more than ten thousand worshipers and is equipped with giant video screens above. Second, its worship services are also broadcast on cable television and sent out over the airwaves. Third, megachurches have various facilities such as areas for eating, areas where household goods are sold, bookstores, and day-care centers for children. Books, audio CDs, and DVDs produced by the preacher of the

church fill the shelves of the bookstore. Fourth, megachurches tend to be located in the suburbs. Fifth, congregations consist of people with relatively higher education levels and higher incomes. The fourth and fifth points indicate that those who attend megachurches tend to be middle class and striving working class rather than poor.

What many megachurches preach is the prosperity gospel, albeit not all megachurches do so. The basic messages of the prosperity gospel are that “Jesus was not poor,” “God wants you to be rich,” “God is positive,” and God guarantees truly faithful believers physical health and financial wealth in this life now.<sup>53</sup> Thus, clergy of the prosperity gospel focus on God’s grace in this world and neither mention suffering, judgment, and redemption, nor bring up controversial sociopolitical issues such as structural racism, abortion, and same-sex marriage. They preach that personal transformation is the key to an abundant life and emphasize the virtues of individualism, personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and personal morality. According to a poll that appeared in *Time* magazine in 2006, 17 percent of all American Christians, of whatever denomination or church size, said they consider themselves to be part of the prosperity gospel movement. Potential sympathizers, however, are more. A full 61 percent agreed with the statement that “God wants people to be prosperous.”<sup>54</sup>

The largest megachurch in the United States is Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. It is estimated that forty thousand members of all races and ethnicities attend five services weekly and a further seven million watch them in their living rooms. With more than three hundred full- and part-time staff and approximately five thousand volunteers, and with a budget of millions of dollars a year, the preacher at Lakewood differs little from many CEOs of big companies.<sup>55</sup> Although the prosperity gospel in megachurches and large churches has been more of a phenomenon among white Christians, it has been penetrating the black Christian community as well. Among well-known black clergy who preach the prosperity gospel are Creflo Dollar of World Changers Church International in Fulton County, Georgia; Frederick K. C. Price of Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles; and T. D. Jakes Sr. of The Potter’s House in Dallas.

Those who place value on the prophetic tradition of the Black Church have increasingly expressed strong concern about the rise of the prosperity gospel movement among black Christians since the 1990s. It is natural for them to have this sentiment because the message of the

prosperity gospel is diametrically opposed to that of the prophetic tradition that includes the social gospel, black liberation theology, and womanist theology. Whereas the prophetic tradition says that “God is on the side of the poor and oppressed,” the prosperity gospel says that “God is on the side of the rich.” While the former emphasizes a collective-oriented sense of freedom and social justice, the latter emphasizes individual freedom and wealth.<sup>56</sup> Harris contends that “the message has moved from community empowerment to individual prosperity. . . . The thinking is that if individuals rise, so will the rest of the community. That is a complete reversal from the mission of the black church during slavery, Reconstruction and civil rights.”<sup>57</sup>

The rise of the prosperity gospel might be a reflection of the larger changes that are taking place in the African American community, most notably in the rise of the black middle class. The prosperity gospel appeals to the black middle class as well as the striving working class, since it gives them spiritual justification for their upward mobility without promoting guilt feelings for leaving the poor black behind. Furthermore, the African American community is divided as to what is the major obstacle for black advancement. The Pew Research Center Survey in 2007 reported that the majority of African Americans (53%) believed that those who could not get ahead in life were mostly responsible for their own condition, albeit three out of ten African Americans (30%) blamed racism for failures to advance.<sup>58</sup> It can be said that putting more emphasis on individualism than group solidarity in the African American community provides a setting where many black Christians are receptive to the theological claim of the prosperity gospel.

Yet, it should be noted that the prosperity gospel that emphasizes self-responsibility has a strong affinity with the logic of the conservative wing of the Republican Party, which tends to blame inner-city poor black youth for their circumstances. Given that black Christians who support the prosperity gospel come largely from the middle class, it is predictable, as Harris argues, that their conservative tendencies might “discourage black nationalist sentiments, promote political conservatism, engender apolitical views on activism, and by default, soften support in black communities for liberal social policies targeted toward minorities and the poor.”<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Black Church was formerly the most independent and stable institution in the African American community and remains an important institution. There is no doubt that without the Black Church black leadership and black organizations would have hardly developed. This, however, has not exempted the Black Church from internal and external critiques over its sociopolitical role. On the contrary, the Black Church has always been put on trial because of its very centrality in the African American community. The basic question that has continually been addressed is whether the Black Church encourages or discourages social activism among African Americans. Although issues facing the Black Church have changed in response to changes in America's sociopolitical environment, this fundamental question has remained.

In this article, I have explored the contours of the sociopolitical role of the Black Church in the post-civil rights era. I highlighted three aspects. First, I detected factors in the overall decline of the Black Church's sociopolitical leadership in the post-civil rights era. My basic argument here was that the decline could not be attributed to the lack of interest on the part of the Black Church but rather three major external factors: a lack of consensus about an African American public policy agenda, lower church attendance, and the rise of both black elected officials and black advocacy organizations. Second, I noted that sexism constituted a major challenge for the contemporary Black Church to overcome. The basic finding here is that although support for the full ordination of women and open acceptance of homosexuals has been gradually increasing, these issues have been often overshadowed by the issues of race. Third, the question of whether the Black Church can reach unchurched black youth in the inner cities is yet another serious one for the contemporary Black Church. In this context, I pointed out that the rise of the prosperity gospel might reinforce a growing class divide between the black middle class and the black poor.

The above discussion reveals that the Black Church in the post-civil rights era has increasingly come under pressure as to whether it can effectively address the often-interlocking issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In all cases, black churches have been involved in dialectical tensions between prophetic voices and conservative forces. In light of these circumstances, it can be said that Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s call for the renewal of a Black Church that is linked to an emphasis on the prophetic

tradition, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, is a legitimate voice, though his emphatic, “The Black Church is dead,” is rather exaggerated. It is my contention that these dialectical tensions are necessary and even constructive so that the Black Church can continually redefine and revitalize its roles to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., “The Black Church Is Dead,” Huffington Post, February 24, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddi-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead\\_b\\_473815.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddi-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html) (accessed July 23, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In the context of the Black Church, terms such as “prophetic energies” and the “prophetic tradition” mean not only pronouncing a radical word of God’s judgment but also being involved in political concerns and activities in the wider community. See, for example, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 12. In this article, the phrase “Black Church” is used to denote the collective experience and reality of black Christianity across denominational lines. The phrase “black churches” is used when my focus is more on individual churches.

<sup>3</sup> Anthea Butler, Jonathan L. Walton, Ronald B. Neal, William D. Hart, Josef Sorett, Edward J. Blum, and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., “Updated with Response: The Black Church is Dead—Long Live the Black Church,” Religion Dispatches, March 9, 2010, [http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated\\_with\\_response%3A\\_the\\_black\\_church\\_is\\_dead%E2%80%94long\\_live\\_the\\_black\\_church](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated_with_response%3A_the_black_church_is_dead%E2%80%94long_live_the_black_church) (accessed July 24, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel G. Freedman, “Call and Response on the State of the Black Church,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/17/us/17religion.html> (accessed July 23, 2011); David Gibson, “Is the Black Church Dead? Debate Flares among African American Christians,” *Politics Daily*, January 15, 2011, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2011/01/15/is-the-black-church-dead-debate-flares-among-african-american-c/> (accessed July 23, 2011); and “IRAAS: Is the Black Church Dead?” Kinetics Faith and Justice Network, October 21, 2010, <http://kinetics.groupsite.com/discussion/topic/show/479501?order=newest> (accessed July 24, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1933); Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, vol.2, *The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944); Franklin E. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen, *The Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975); Vincent Harding, *There Is a River* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1973), xiii.

<sup>8</sup> For further details of their “dialectical model of the Black Church,” see Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 10–16.

<sup>9</sup> R. Drew Smith, ed., *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civil Culture in Post Civil Rights America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and R. Drew Smith, ed., *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Pew Forum, "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans," January 30, 2009, 16–17, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=389> (accessed March 7, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> R. Drew Smith, "Assessing the Public Policy Practices of African American Churches," in Smith, *Long March Ahead*, 11–17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Will the Circle be Unbroken? The Political Involvement of Black Churches since the 1960s," in *Black Political Organizations in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, ed. Ollie A. Johnson III and Karin L. Stanford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Andres Tapia, "Soul Searching," *Christianity Today*, March 4, 1996, [http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=712](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=712) (accessed August 6, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Pew Forum, "Religious Portrait of African-Americans," 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pinn, *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 27–36.

<sup>19</sup> Calhoun-Brown, "Will the Circle be Unbroken?," 22–24; Calhoun-Brown, "What a Fellowship: Civil Society, African American Churches, and Public Life," in Smith, *New Day Begun*, 48; R. Drew Smith, "Assessing the Public Policy Practices," 9–10, 17–23.

<sup>20</sup> Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* ([1990] Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 274.

<sup>21</sup> R. Drew Smith, "Black Churches within a Changing Civic Culture in America," in Smith, *New Day Begun*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Pinn, *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 96–105.

<sup>23</sup> R. Drew Smith and Corwin Smidt, "System Confidence, Congregational Characteristics, and Black Church Civic Engagement," in Smith, *New Day Begun*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, "Assessing the Public Policy Practices," 20.

<sup>25</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 274.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 289; Renita J. Weems, "Black America and Religion," *Ebony*, November 2005, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson, "Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change," *Journal of Religious Thought* 56/57, no. 2/1 (2001), 105.

<sup>28</sup> On this discussion, see Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 294–97; and Pinn, *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 121, 126–31.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 285–89; Pinn, *Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 120–30.

<sup>30</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 289–94.

<sup>31</sup> Sandra L. Barnes, "Whatsoever Will Let Her Come: Social Activism and Gender Inclusivity in the Black Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no.3 (2006), 373.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi; Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 97–98.

<sup>33</sup> See James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power; God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought before and after Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 149. See also, Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), xiv–xv.

<sup>35</sup> Pinn, *Black Church in the Post–Civil Rights Era*, 132.

<sup>36</sup> Pew Forum, “Religious Portrait of African-Americans,” 13–14.

<sup>37</sup> The formal name of the Moynihan report is “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” See BlackPast.org,

<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/moynihan-report-1965> (accessed November 8, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Pinn, *Black Church in the Post–Civil Rights Era*, 106–8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–101.

<sup>43</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 309–10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 305–6.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Black Flight: African American Churches Leave the Inner City for the Suburbs,” *Christianity Today*, December 20, 2008,

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/january/8.13.htm> (accessed June 26, 2011)

<sup>46</sup> Pinn, *Black Church in the Post–Civil Rights Era*, 6–27, 107.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–8; David Briggs, “Men Are Losing Interest in Historically Black Churches,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 26, 1994,

<http://www.lexisnexis.com/Inacui2api/delivery/> (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> See, Christopher Winship, “End of a Miracle? Crime, Faith, and Partnership in Boston in the 1990,” in Smith, *Long March Ahead*, 171–92.

<sup>49</sup> Wendy Murray Zoba, “Separate and Equal,” *Christianity Today* 40, no. 2 (5 February 1996): 14–24.

<sup>50</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>51</sup> Frederic C. Harris, “Entering the Promised Land? The Rise of Prosperity Gospel and Post-Civil Rights Black Politics,” in *Religion and Democracy in the United States: Danger or Opportunity?*, ed. Alan Wolfe and Ira Katznelson (New York: Princeton University Press, 2010), 256, 261.

<sup>52</sup> For detailed features of megachurches, see Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “2009 Profile of the People Who Attend America’s Megachurches,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research,

[http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch\\_attender\\_report.htm](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_attender_report.htm) (accessed November 9, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Harris, “Entering the Promised Land?,” 266–72; Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “From Liberation to Mutual Fund: Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the African American Church,” in *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*, ed. J. Matthew Wilson (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 139–45.

<sup>54</sup> David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to be Rich?,” *Time*, 10 September 2006,

<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1533448,00.html> (accessed January 10, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Kalder, "The New Face of Christianity," *Observer*, March 7, 2010, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/Inacui2api/delivery/> (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Harris, "Entering the Promised Land?," 255–76; Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund," 131–60.

<sup>57</sup> Ira J. Hadnot, "Politics Toned Down at Black Churches," *Dallas Morning News*, July 31, 2004, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/Inacui2api/delivery/> (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Pew Research Center, "Blacks See Growing Values Gap between Poor and Middle Class," November 13, 2007, 33.

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/Race-2007.pdf> (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Harris, "Entering the Promised Land?," 260–61.