The Benefits of Church Involvement for African-Americans

The Perspectives of Congregants, Church Staff, and the Church Pastor

Cassandra Chaney
Louisiana State University

Introduction

[1] Religion is a vital thread in the fabric of American life. According to Pargament and Maton, "religion is a widespread, multifaceted presence in American life, and has the potential to influence individual and community well-being through a diversity of strategic pathways and in a diversity of ecological contexts" (502). The social effects of religion can be seen in the abundance of temporal and financial support given to and by religious organizations. For instance, 37% of all volunteer activity in America is church related (Samuelson) and congregations contribute more money to community causes ($6.6 billion) than do corporations ($6.1 billion; Goodstein). Further, only the federal government supports more human services than faith communities (Burger and Youkeles). Moreover, increases in the number of social service agencies that are working with religious organizations in order to disseminate their services suggests the value of creating stronger partnerships between these entities (Chalfant and Hellner; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, and Lincoln). In addition to responding to community needs vis-à-vis monetary support, church organizations are also instrumental in supporting the identity of their members.

[2] When compared with households, childcare centers, schools, neighborhoods, and peer groups, religious institutions are unique because of their capacity to help build and maintain individual and group identities (Ellison); provide family support systems for members (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Murray-Swank); connect members to a higher power (Blaine and Crocker); contribute to more effective ways of parenting (Boyatzis; Chatters and Taylor; Horn; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank; Wiley, Warren and Montanelli); minimize stress (Taylor, Chatters, and Levin); help members to successfully cope with the challenges of adolescence (Ball, Armistead, and Austin); create stronger marriages (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, and Killmer); recognize their purpose in life (Berger; Ellison,), provide for the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of members (Koenig, McCollough, and Larson; Taylor, Jackson, and Chatters); as well as facilitate the development of a spiritual compass that allows individuals to make sense of the world and recognize their place in it (Ellison; Ellison and Gay; Marks, Swanson, Nesteruk, and Hopkins-Williams; Maton; Pargament; Weber). In addition, religious organizations facilitate fellowship among members, encourage belief in the sacred and spiritual, as well as promote a "body of beliefs," or doctrine among members (Johnstone).

[3] Religious organizations can also help individuals to develop a personal and social identity. In a congregation people can experience a sense of belonging, of being valued, of being protected and of being "at home" – a feeling that has been likened by Wind and Lewis to being "a member of a large family in a huge living room" (154). This feature of congregations is particularly important "since many individuals may be searching for new ways of establishing the kinds of trusting relationships which are essential for their sense of security but which are no longer necessarily provided by families and neighborhoods" (Giddens: 114). By virtue of its ability to facilitate individual and group identity, religion is a distinct form of social interaction.

[4] Although religion has the ability to facilitate "common thought, purpose and drive" (Berger: 6), the benefits of church involvement can differ among persons within the same religious organization because

of the varied experiences and perspectives of its members. While this recognition does not minimize the power of religious institutions to influence persons collectively, it does however, recognize the potential for many perspectives to co-exist within a single religious organization.

Brief Overview of Benefits of Religion for African-Americans

[5] Historically and contemporaneously, religion and religious institutions have assisted African-Americans both materially and psychologically (Lincoln and Mamiya; Mays and Nicholson; Nelsen and Nelsen; Nightingale; Picot, Debanne, Namazi and Wykle). Taylor and Chatters identified three ways that the Black church supports African-Americans (1988). First, the Black church has been responsive to the needs of its community members, whose access to traditional social institutions has been restricted. Second, the Black church provides material, emotional, and spiritual assistance to its members as well as advice (Marks and Chaney; Taylor, Jackson and Chatters). Moreover, formal supportive relationships within these churches were carried out through various organizations designed to assist church members and others in the community (i.e., food and clothing programs, visiting programs to the sick and shut-in). Finally, the Black church is particularly prominent in the role it plays in the positive appraisal of self (i.e., self-worth and self-esteem of members) and the affirmation of shared beliefs and attitudes held by members of the congregation (Taylor, Jackson and Chatters).

[6] African-American churches also provide a positive forum of support. For example, Young not only described the strong extended kin networks that exist within many African-American families but also identified the Black church as being the greatest resource in providing nurturing environments for mothers and their children, as well as a positive cultural identity in which to rear children. In addition to the kinship bonds that exist among African-Americans, church attendance has been found to solidify African-American families (Mosely-Howard and Evans; Taylor).

[7] In an examination of the spiritual socialization of African-American children, Haight discovered many adults viewed the church as a haven in which children could learn about their heritage from other African-Americans who value and nurture them. In addition to being exposed to the hopeful and loving message of the Gospels, children are provided a positive cultural environment by attending vacation Bible school, being baptized, listening to the weekly children's sermons, and by attending informal social events. These findings and others show that the Black church supports African-American parents and children in many ways (Marks and Chaney).

[8] This paper seeks to build upon the work of previous scholars by examining, in closer detail, the *specific* ways that church involvement supports individuals and families, from the perspectives of congregants, church staff, and the church pastor. Although the anthropological ethnography used by previous researchers resulted in a greater knowledge of the organizational structure of the church and a better interpretive understanding of the adaptive life styles of African-Americans within the church (Williams), the methodology of this study is unique because it analyzes the qualitative (interview) responses of congregants and church staff within the same church organization regarding the benefits of church involvement, as well as how pastoral sermons support these themes.

Research Question

[9] The aforementioned section highlighted the importance of church involvement for African-Americans, but many of the benefits have been expressed by congregants without explanation. To date, scholars rarely explore *how* or *why* church involvement is important, from the perspectives of African-American congregants, church staff, and the church pastor. This paper qualitatively explores and responds to the question: "What benefits does religious involvement provide African-Americans, according to congregants, church staff, and the church pastor?"

Participants

[10] The congregants were 11 African-American women and 6 African-American men who were actively involved in a church community in the Midwest. The age of participants ranged from 25 years of age to 65 years of age. The mean age of women was 42.23 years (SD = 6.15) and 45.37 years (SD = 6.81) for men. The average amount of education for females was 12.55 years (SD =2.23) and 12.03 years (SD = 1.30) for males. Four of the women (35%) were single/never married; three of the women (30%) were divorced; and four of the women (35%) were married. Five women had at least one child 2–18 years of age; two women had at least one grandchild over the age of 21 years of age; and four women did not have children. All of the church staff (1 pastor; 2 reverends; 3 deacons) were married, and had at least one child 2–18 years of age. Three of the men had at least one grandchild over the age of 21 years of age.

Participants were recruited through public solicitation, following up with interested individuals via telephone, and word of mouth. No monetary compensation was provided for the participants in the study. The identity of the participants is protected through pseudonyms.

Research Design

[11] This study used a qualitative approach that included extensive participant observations by the author, focus group interviews, and one-on-one interviews with congregants, church staff, and the church pastor. Since the religious experience has many complexities (Haight; Seul), qualitative methods provided an opportunity to reaffirm the "voices" of everyone within the church organization as important, which was well suited for the vivid, verbal imagery commonly used in this method. Most important, these different lenses provided a richer examination of how various individuals within the church are influenced by the role of religion in their lives and how this varies somewhat based on their marital, parental, or religious status (Chatters and Taylor; Dollahite, Marks and Goodman).

Coding

[12] In order to identify themes within the interviews and sermons, all transcribed sermons and interviews were analyzed for content using an open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin). In keeping with open-coding techniques, no a priori categories were imposed on the narrative data. Instead, themes were identified from the narratives. In order to clearly abstract themes during the sermons and interviews, words and phrases were the units of analysis. For example, when answering the statement, "Tell me about the things that you like most about Brethren [Baptist Church]," if the participant used the words or phrases "fellowship," "friendship," or "associate," these words were regarded as categorical anchors regarding the importance of physical interaction with members in the church environment. To control for the "length and stylistic complexity" of written and verbal responses, raters only coded for the "presence or absence of endorsement" of particular categories (Mattis).

Findings

[13] This study was led by the question, "What benefits does religious involvement provide African-Americans, according to congregants, church staff, and the church pastor?" and resulted in two major findings. First, the greatest benefits of church involvement for congregants were fellowship, the church's focus on evangelism and discipleship, positive internal experiences associated with membership, and having familial regard for the church. The greatest benefits of church involvement for congregants, according to church staff, were spiritual guidance, advice about life, the provision of hope, and the provision of social supports and networks.

The Benefits of Church Involvement – Perspective of Congregants

[14] *Fellowship*. For congregants, attending a church where the members are emotionally warm and free to express themselves is the greatest benefit of church involvement. When describing what makes attending Brethren Baptist Church such a warm and pleasant experience, Myra, a 27-year old college student remarked:

> I think I like the fellowship. Everyone tends to be very warm, very open, and that's very important. You know, very approachable. I think I like also the sense of humor that people have, and that comes all the way from the leadership, you know.

[15] The need for warmth and fellowship was also confirmed by Faye, a 35-year old single African-American woman, when she said:

> I like the warmth and fellowship of this church. Everyone is not just warm and friendly, but they are also genuinely concerned about you. For instance, if the people in this church don't see me during Wednesday Night Bible Study or during the Sunday Service, they will let me know that they missed me when they see me again. They will say something like, "I didn't see you at the Bible Study last week. I missed you." That lets me know that they care about me.

[16] Pastoral sermons extol warmth and fellowship in Brethren and make it possible for those involved with the church to successfully face future challenges. During one of his Sunday sermons, Pastor Benevolence said:

It's a wonderful thing when God's people get together. I look forward to being with God's people. It's when we're together that we get fortified to carry on in the world for another week.

[17] When commenting on the importance of fellowship for church members during the Wednesday Night Bible Study, Pastor Benevolence used a beautiful analogy to identify the salience of fellowship in the modern day church. He said:

> The church is a hospital for the sick! And so you come here and get loved and embraced and cared for and showered with grace. And feelings are not judged. That allows you to be transparent now and open and talk about your problem because you are not going to be judged. When the church is operating correctly, that's the healing part of the church! Because the Bible says that there is now no condemnation. And so you come in the household of faith. Listen. That's why a lot of folk are in cults today because the Christian community did not embrace them like God had designed for them to be embraced. And so they got off into some cult! Because it was the cult that embraced them and so what that says to us as Christians, we don't talk about people. We don't run people down. We don't. Because there is some good in the worst of us and some bad in the best of us and it doesn't behoove any of us to talk about the rest of us!

[18] These statements are rich for they underscore the reasons why African-Americans are motivated to associate with members of their church organization. Specifically, African-Americans are involved with their church organizations because of the warmth that they experience from its members, their recognition of the value of their presence in the church organization, as well as their increased ability to successfully cope with the daily stressors of life. Interestingly, in addition to the structural function of the church in terms of its warmth and non-judgmental social climate, the functional aspect of the church was highlighted by Pastor Benevolence's view that the church is a "hospital for the sick" whereby individuals who associate with the church are loved, embraced, and cared for.

[19] *Evangelism and Discipleship*. For other congregants, attending a church whose focus is evangelism (preaching) and discipleship (teaching) are the greatest benefits of church involvement. When speaking about what drew her to Brethren Baptist Church, Claire, a 25-year old graduate student remarked:

> What I like about Brethren is that it's a teaching church. Instead of going out and building a bigger church, like most other churches do, the primary focus of this church is to bring the Word of God to people.

[20] Other congregants have high regard for the evangelism and discipleship focus of Brethren as well. Faye reiterates Claire's view when she said:

> This church has a lot of ministries, but their primary focus is bringing the Word of God to sinners who don't know Jesus. This is the main focus of this church, really.

[21] Church staff members also have high regard for Brethren's focus on evangelism and discipleship. The previous comments are reiterated by Reverend Solomon, a 48-year old married minister in Brethren, when he made the following comment:

> Evangelism means telling people about Jesus. A lot of people don't know Him, and evangelism is how we accomplish this. Now, discipleship is different. When you look at the word "discipleship," you will see that it comes from the word "discipline." This means that individuals who know Jesus must be disciplined about making disciples of others so that they can share the message of God with others too. Evangelism and discipleship are the primary goals of this church because these were the primary goals of Jesus.

[22] These statements highlight that African-Americans are motivated to be part of a religious organization whose primary focus is on evangelism and discipleship because these goals are consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ. In addition, these narratives also suggest that preaching and teaching is predicated upon psychological acknowledgement and physical action. As an *evangelizer*, an individual must accept his or her responsibility to "tell others about Jesus." As a *disciple*, one must be "disciplined" in "sharing the message of God with others." Together, the evangelism and discipleship mission of the church join its members in one common purpose and ensure that the purpose of the church is advanced throughout the community at large.

[23] *Positive Internal Experiences*. Some congregants said that feeling spiritually refreshed was the greatest benefit of church involvement. When asked why she began attending this church, Katherine, a

45-year old mother of two commented:

> A co-worker invited me and I am so glad that I came! This pastor really knows the Word of God and I feel so refreshed after I leave. It's obvious that he really cares for his congregation and his counsel on reaching your full potential is exactly what I need at this time in my life.

[24] Positive internal experiences were also important benefits of church involvement for other congregants. These positive internal experiences make it possible for individuals to mentally and emotionally cope with the difficulties that they may experience during the coming week. When asked what drew her to Brethren, Glynda, a 50-year old divorced grandmother remarked:

> I love coming to this church because it's like getting a spiritual meal. I feel spiritually satisfied when I leave, and that really helps me get through the week.

[25] The positive internal experiences that many congregants experience from church involvement were summed up by Ms. Merry, a 52-year old divorcee. When relating why she made Brethren Baptist Church her church home, she said:

> I've been coming here since March 8, 1981. When I first moved here, I came to be with my daughter and my son-in-law and wasn't planning on staying long. Then, I visited this church and immediately felt at peace, so I've been coming here ever since."

[26] Pastoral sermons also support the positive internal experiences commonly associated with church attendance. During another sermon, Pastor Benevolence made this clear when he said:

> I don't care how you came here feeling, you should always feel better when you leave. You're in the House of God and with your family, so if you don't feel better after coming to church, something's wrong with you! You don't want to feel better.

[27] These narratives draw attention to the short and long-term effects of church involvement for African-Americans. Specifically, the short-term effects of church involvement were highlighted by the ability of Ms. Merry to "immediately feel at peace" upon her initial contact with the church, while the long-term effects of church involvement could be seen by Glynda's feeling "spiritually satisfied" when she leaves the church, but more importantly, of how the "spiritual meal" that she receives at church "helps her get through the week." For many African-Americans, emotional refreshment, spiritual satisfaction, and internal peace are positive and salient feelings that are part and parcel of religious involvement, which, in turn, makes it easier for them to collectively and successfully weather the challenges of the coming week.

[28] *Family-Like Connections*. For other congregants, family-like connections are the greatest benefit of church involvement. When commenting on what makes Brethren a special place for him, Mr. Fleming, a 55-year old deacon in the church, enthusiastically remarked:

> Since I was a little boy, my parents always taught me the importance of going to church. I feel very fortunate to be a member of such a warm and loving congregation. Everybody knows everybody and helps everybody. It's really like a family here.

[29] Feeling as if one is part of a family is important for other church members as well. Edna, a 36-year old single African-American female, made the following comment:

> I'm not originally from here and I miss my family. But ever since I have been attending Brethren, I feel like I have a surrogate family here. I feel close to the people here, can confide in them and love to worship with them. For me, they are the next best thing to family. They are really my second family.

[30] Feeling as though one is among family was another salient aspect of church involvement for other congregants. When examining the benefits of church involvement for congregants, an unanticipated finding was when a female who had recently become reacquainted with the church after many years of inactivity, expressed public gratitude for the concern that church members showed her during that time. For this woman, the church's active concern in her reactivation, led to her resolve that, regardless of her present health, she would remain an active church member. When publicly expressing the value of the church in her life during the pastor's class, "Healing Wounds of the Past through Love," Ms. Chloe, a 55-

year old grandmother of five stated:

> There was a time when I wasn't in the church like I should have been. This church means so much to me because you have folks who will come and see about you and get you back into church. But, I'm staying in this church from now on! I ain't going no where!

[31] These testimonies show that religious involvement allows African-Americans to develop key relationships with other church members in a way that may be similar to the kinds of relationships that they have with members of their biological family. The connections that they build with individuals within the church makes it possible for African-Americans to freely confide in other church members, regard them as "second family" and benefit from the concern of those who "come and see about" them. Even for individuals who may have at one time distanced themselves from the church, the familial concern that those in the church demonstrated toward them may encourage these individuals to not only become involved with the church again, but to make a greater commitment to church involvement than what they had previously.

[32] The preceding paragraphs highlighted the responses of congregants regarding the benefits of church involvement as fellowship, evangelism and discipleship, positive internal experiences, and the family-like connections that members derive from church involvement. The next section of the paper will focus on the benefits of church involvement, as voiced by the pastor and church staff.

The Benefits of Church Involvement – Perspective of Church Staff

[33] *Provides Hope*. According to Pastor Benevolence, the greatest benefit of church involvement for congregants is the hope that the church provides its members. During an interview, Pastor Benevolence shared the following:

> I'll tell you right now, the greatest benefit of church attendance for congregants is hope. You see, when I was a young boy, we used to sing the song, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and I also remember the words "When I get to the pearly gates of heaven and those big doors will open wide." Now, we didn't live in a big house and we didn't have a car, but we could sing about having those things! That's really what the church is about. Giving people hope. When things are hard and times are rough, people need to know that they can get through anything with God's help.

[34] Church staff also believed that hope is an important aspect of church involvement for congregants. Minister Campbell, a 55-year old married father of two adult children, said the following:

> When times are tough, hope is the anchor that allows us to stay close to God. If we didn't have the church, we would have no hope! The hope that Brethren gives fills us up intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

[35] The church as a beacon of hope was echoed by other church staff. Reverend Crest, a 45-year old married father of three adult children, related the following:

> Black folks have been through a lot in this country. When our families were torn apart, the church gave us something to cling to. We're still struggling, but this church gives us hope and let us know that we are strong, responsible, capable, worthy and can handle anything with God's help!

[36] These narratives underscore the ability of religious organizations to provide hope to African-Americans during times of economic and financial uncertainty. Even during times when the material possessions of African-Americans were meager, their ability to sing about things that they did not possess infused them with hope and made them confident in God's ability to help them "get through anything." Furthermore, according to church staff, the church provides African-Americans intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment, as well as confidence in their ability to remain resilient during historically trying times. As Reverend Crest shared, "when our [Black] families were torn apart, the church gave us something to cling to." Although African-Americans "struggle" with societal pressures, with "God's help," they are strong, responsible, capable, and "can handle anything" with the hope that God provides.

[37] *Extensive Community Outreach*. The community outreach work performed by Brethren was an important aspect of church involvement for church staff. According to Patricia, a 34-year church staff member, Brethren is unique in its provision of these services. She said:

Although there are churches that are extremely giving and provide an array of assistance, I believe our church is unique in this community in that it serves in almost all areas. In other words, some churches have specialties such as youth ministry, Sunday school, seniors programs, health and healing, a prison ministry, etc. However, ours has a Christian Academy for the children, G.O.D. (Grace Over Drugs) Shelter, and for those not in the program, they can still come for weekly meetings, which meet twice a week, counseling and many other ministries.

[38] Other church staff members believe that congregants benefit when they are involved with a church that is actively involved in community outreach efforts. When commenting on what separates Brethren from other area churches, Anita, the 39-year old director of development, says:

Yes, our church is unique when compared to other churches – African-American and others. We believe in identifying needs and filling them. As a result, we have a Men's G.O.D. (Grace Over Drugs) Shelter, and an up and coming Women's G.O.D. (Grace Over Drugs) Shelter to address substance abuse and its ramifications in this community. We also have the Brethren Academy, which is the only school of its type in [the area]. It provides successful educational outcomes through a holistic approach. Our Brethren Credit Union encourages and teaches members about saving on a long-term basis to foster economic empowerment.

[39] The importance of community outreach was later reiterated by Ms. Blank, a 35-year old mother of two, when she said the following:

Yes, we have the most ministries within one church, to my knowledge. I mean *active* ministries. We have our own credit union and we have a residential treatment center for men, and one for women to open within the next year. We also have a private school and a staff that works five to seven days per week. We also have someone on site available from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. We also have a Girl Scout and Cub Scout group on site and they meet every week. We also have a reverend that strictly works with our youth programs. We have a separate church and level of learning for children ages zero to seventeen years of age outside of regular Sunday services.

[40] Pastoral sermons frequently supported the value that Brethren placed on its community outreach efforts. During yet another sermon, Pastor Benevolence remarked:

We're not like most churches around here. We are not an ordinary church. We have a lot of ministries that specifically cater to the needs of people in this community. That's what makes this church special and sets us apart. We could become an ordinary church, but we wouldn't be serving the community to the best of our capacity.

[41] These testimonies reveal the perceptions of church staff regarding what makes their religious organization "unique" in comparison to "ordinary" area churches. Specifically, the array of services that their church provides (i.e., the Men's G.O.D. shelter, the Women's G.O.D. shelter, the Brethren Academy, the Brethren Credit Union, and the Girl Scout and Cub Scout groups) speak to their comprehensive nature, and make these the most salient benefits for church involvement for congregants. Furthermore, there are three reasons why extensive community outreach may be especially important for congregants and church staff. For one, in comparison to other area churches that may, at the very least, have few ministries, or at the most, a number of dormant ministries, congregants and church staff at Brethren can take pride in the number of *active* ministries of which Brethren is responsible. Also, congregants and church staff may directly benefit from one or more of these ministries themselves (i.e., as members of the credit union, or as parents whose children are enrolled in the Brethren Academy). Furthermore, as shared by Pastor Benevolence, Brethren's refusal to "become an ordinary church" (under his direction) elevates its community position in the eyes of its members, makes them feel that they are part of a "special" church community, and further distinguishes them from other community churches.

[42] *Pastoral Love for the Church*. For other church staff, the pastor's love and commitment to the church was reportedly the greatest benefit of church involvement for congregants. The pastor's love for the church was identified by Deacon Winter during the Wednesday Night Bible Study, when he remarked:

I don't think ya'll realize how much Pastor loves this church. I have seen him give of his time, his energy and his finances to keep this church alive. With some of the financial problems that we've been having, a lot of pastors would have left a long time ago. But, not Pastor. He really loves this church. You can see it in his face. He loves this church! You all ought to feel blessed to be part of

a church where your pastor loves you so.

[43] Other church staff members have high regard for the love that the pastor has for the church. When commenting on the value of pastoral love for the church, Deacon Bill made the following comment:

> I have been to several churches in my day, but I have never seen a pastor who loved his church so much and who was so committed to it. Pastor Benevolence constantly makes sure that this church is serving the community like it's supposed to and I respect that. I've seen him discouraged, and a lot of pastors would have left because they wouldn't have been able to handle the responsibility. But, day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, and year-to-year, he shows us that he loves us by giving us the counsel that we need from the Bible, counseling us, setting us straight and just being there. But, when you look at everything that he does, he does it all because he loves this church.

[44] These narratives reveal the various ways the pastor demonstrates his commitment to the church (i.e., time, energy, and finances) as well as the extent to which congregants should be appreciative of these efforts. In contrast to pastors who may abandon their churches during times of financial trouble, Deacon Winter's comment suggests the resolve by which the pastor is determined to stand by the congregants. Additionally, as Deacon Bill attests, during times when the pastor was discouraged, his ability to handle the "day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, and year-to-year" responsibilities is a time-charted, concrete indicator of his love and commitment for the congregants. Furthermore, as evidenced by the statement, "giving us the counsel that we need from the Bible, counseling us, setting us straight and just being there," the pastor shows this commitment through counsel, discipline, and his physical presence. All in all, these narratives reveal when congregants and church staff are aware of the many ways that the pastor demonstrates his consistent love for them, as evidenced by giving freely of his time, energy, and resources, they are motivated to become involved in their church organizations and to support the church in one or more of these ways, as well.

Summary

[45] Research has indicated that African-Americans are benefited physically, mentally, and socially when they are involved with a church organization. We know less, however, about the perceived benefits of church involvement from various perspectives within a church organization.

[46] This study qualitatively examined the responses of congregants, church staff and the church pastor regarding the benefits of church involvement for African-Americans. To reiterate, the greatest benefits of church involvement, according to congregants, are fellowship, evangelism and discipleship, positive internal experiences, and family-like connections. The greatest benefits of church involvement, according to church staff, are the provision of hope, extensive community outreach, and pastoral love for the church.

[47] *Fellowship* addresses that African-Americans are benefited from church involvement when they feel emotionally warm and supported by church members. Furthermore, African-Americans not only value the warmth and approachableness of fellow members, but are especially comforted when they are confident that these individuals are "genuinely concerned" for them. An especially interesting theme that emerged from this study was the metaphorical comparison of the church as a "hospital for the sick." Theoretically and literally, African-Americans members in church organizations psychologically, physically, and emotionally benefit when they feel cared for, embraced, and loved. When the "church hospital" is working at its optimal echelon, it facilitates a non-judgmental atmosphere, which motivates its members to actively fellowship with one another, which in turn, enables congregants to better cope with life's stressors since they have a system from which to draw nurturing support during times of need.

[48] *Evangelism and discipleship* demonstrates African-Americans benefit from involvement with their church organizations when their beliefs and behaviors align themselves with the goals of the pastor. For the individuals in this study, evangelism (e.g., "telling others about Jesus") and discipleship (e.g., "teaching and promoting spiritual growth") were the benchmarks by which they supported the comprehensive mission of the church. Although it can be reasonably argued that physical and financial support of the church is sustained via evangelism and discipleship, congregants are also benefited by this mission when all of its members, congregants, and church staff, young and old, educated and non-educated, married and single, collectively engage in these efforts. When African-Americans engage in evangelism and discipleship efforts on their jobs, at school, with their families, or the community at large, they support the church mission, which, in turn, contributes to closer relationships with their fellow church members, church staff, and the church pastor.

[49] *Positive internal experiences* speak to the psychological, emotional and spiritual healing that African-Americans receive from church involvement. Perhaps the strongest internal motivator of church involvement for African-Americans is the peace that they experience when they attend church. Feeling peaceful may be especially salient for African-Americans who are experiencing external stressors such as unemployment, family stress, or who reside in high crime neighborhoods. Moreover, this peace may help mitigate internal stressors such as feelings of loneliness, depression, or other health-related problems. An especially interesting perspective was the one provided by Pastor Benevolence in which there was "something wrong" with individuals who leave the church and who do not feel better. This places the responsibility on the individual to be proactive in guarding their psychological and emotional state and to diminish the extent to which external forces are responsible for disrupting their peace. This knowledge may contribute to the emotional and psychological resilience of African-Americans for, regardless of what is occurring in their lives, their internal state is, and will always be an aspect of their life of which they can control.

[50] *Family-like connections* make it possible for African-Americans to develop close relationships with church members that are comparable to those experienced within their families of origin. The familial links established by African-Americans may take on added value for the newly separated or divorced, widowed, and transient members, or those who find themselves in a geographical area that is greatly distanced from their family. Furthermore, congregants who shared especially strong bonds with their families may be actively seeking a comparable environment by which they can experience the same or similar feelings as those experienced in their own families. Although the shift from fellow congregants to "surrogate" or "second family" is certainly not an overnight transformation, this psychological shift regarding the value of the church for congregants is facilitated when church members provide many of the same types of support as those provided by families. Specifically, when African-Americans consistently provide for the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of one another, this strengthens their relationship and makes it possible for them to regard one another as family.

[51] *The provision of hope* illustrates that, during seas of contemporary and historical uncertainty, church involvement is an anchor that supports African-Americans. As a group, many enslaved Africans had their families torn apart by slavery, and contemporary African-Americans have struggled economically, educationally, and socially during various periods in history. In spite of the various stressors that they experience, however, hope makes it possible for African-Americans and their families to successfully face these challenges, grow, and thrive. A common theme was if it were not for the church, African-Americans would have no hope. The church as the catalyst for hope may be especially salient for congregants who were adolescents or young adults during the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. In addition to their possible role as civil rights advocates, the church was the center by which African-Americans laughed, cried, and prayed for the advancement of their brethren. In a stressful world, hope is the anchor that makes it possible for African-Americans to be strong, responsible, capable, and able to handle anything with God's help.

[52] *Extensive community outreach* is another important aspect of this study because it indicates that church involvement makes African-Americans aware of the ways that their church supports both church and non-church members. Although Brethren's community edification efforts are primarily accomplished through evangelism and discipleship, this church provides programs to help individuals break free of substance abuse, such as the Men's Grace over Drugs (G.O.D.) Shelter House, or through various classes, such as the Wednesday Night Bible Class that teaches financial independence, how to have healthy relationships, and how to foster positive self-esteem. Interestingly, it is not required that an individual be a member of Brethren to receive these benefits nor to attend these classes. Brethren's willingness to assist individuals who are not associated with the church contradicts Steinitz's earlier findings in which assistance from church members and clergy was primarily contingent upon an individual's past record of involvement with church activities.

[53] *Pastoral love for the church* demonstrates that African-Americans are benefited when they are involved with church organizations that are led by pastors who unselfishly and wholeheartedly give of their resources, energy, and time for individuals and families in need. Interestingly, church staff viewed pastoral love as a modern-day comparison to the love that Jesus showed his followers. When African-Americans believe that their pastor truly cares about their physical, emotional, psychological, material, and spiritual welfare, this may motivate them to develop a relationship with the pastor that endures over the course of their lives.

[54] In sum, the findings from this study support those of previous research in that one of the greatest benefits of church involvement for African-Americans is the receipt of material, emotional, and spiritual assistance, pastoral sermons that provide hope, and building strong supportive networks with others

(Lincoln and Mamiya; Mays and Nicholson; Nelsen and Nelsen; Roof and McKinney). In spite of the historical difficulties that African-Americans have experienced, hope-infused sermons make it possible for congregants to feel confident that they can successfully handle anything with God's help. Essentially, in a world where they must cope with various stressors, such as the "seas" of unemployment, familial disharmony and change, racism, and social unrest, hope is the anchor that makes it possible for them to remain close to God and to one another. As a result, when congregants recognize that their experiences are *shared* experiences, they are more likely to "intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually" support one another via sustained church attendance and providing words of encouragement.

[55] Conversely, new themes identified in this study were fellowship, the church's focus on evangelism and discipleship, positive internal experiences, family-like connections, extensive community outreach, and pastoral love for the church. As voiced by one of the congregants, the warmth, approachableness, and humor that is exemplified in the church "comes all the way from the leadership," or specifically from the pastor and his church staff. This comment suggests that the climate of the church is greatly influenced by the personality and values of the pastor. Furthermore, the members of this church took pride in the modest size of their church, in comparison to local churches that were larger, yet did not have the emphasis on evangelism and discipleship that were the distinguishing characteristics of their church. Essentially, the pastor's decision not to "go out and build a bigger church" allows congregants to feel that they are part of a close knit family and infers that the church has established priorities that will ultimately benefit the community.

[56] Additionally, the positive feelings that congregants experience through church attendance have immediate as well as long-term benefits. By and large, this makes it possible for congregants to receive immediate gratification from the church experience as well as a trajectory of continued religious involvement. Furthermore, the family-like connective nature of the church operates when individuals liken the congregation to their biological family, or regard the congregation as their family, irrespective of biological ties. As a result of sharing the same pastor, church surroundings, and facilitative warmth, individuals easily view their fellow congregants as individuals that they can become close to, confide in, and with whom they can enjoy worship.

[57] Also, the congregants took a great deal of pride in the extensive community outreach efforts of their church. Specifically, that Brethren addresses the educational, intellectual, and financial needs of their community via the Christian Academy for children, the substance abuse program, as well as the Brethren Credit Union which teaches financial responsibility and economic empowerment. In this sense, the church is esteemed in terms of its communal functionality and not simply as a building to be used for religious purposes. Last, the church staff's testimonies regarding the love that the pastor has for the church despite seeing him discouraged at times may "humanize" the pastor to congregants and church staff alike. Simply, these individuals may understand that the pastor's provision of time, energy, and finances is sometimes difficult, yet he consciously and joyously makes a "daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly" commitment to advancing the interests of the church and its congregants.

Limitations

[58] One limitation of this study is its small sample size. Although this study was exploratory in nature, examining a larger African-American church sample may have resulted in more expansive themes regarding the benefits of church involvement for African-Americans. Another limitation was the overwhelming reported positive aspects of church involvement, specifically, that there were no negative comments regarding the participants' involvement with Brethren. Although one might suspect that the lack of negative themes may indicate that there were not enough negative comments to be regarded as a theme or that the negative comments varied too much to create a theme, this was not the case. However, the lack of negative data regarding church involvement may be related to three explanations. First, the participants may operate under the belief that it is "unchristian" to say anything negative against the church in general or about the pastor, specifically. Furthermore, the effects of 'interviewer bias' (e.g., the tendency of participants to portray themselves in a positive light to the interviewer) may have been strongly responsible for the proliferation of these positively-infused narratives. Second, as the congregants and church staff was aware that I sought permission from the pastor before they were interviewed, this may have motivated them to deliberately concentrate on and share positive aspects of church involvement while omitting those aspects of church involvement that they deemed to be potentially damaging or harmful. Even though all church staff and congregants were ensured that their identity and confidentiality would be protected, these individuals may have had concerns that their pastor would learn about those aspects of church involvement of which they were not particularly pleased, and were intrinsically motivated to provide positive narratives. Third, the time frame of this study is important as these same persons, if interviewed during a different period of time, may have provided more negative perspectives.

[59] In addition, eliciting the narrative of a different subset of individuals within this church organization may have also revealed the presence of negative comments regarding church involvement, as well. Reports from a larger sample size may have provided additional or even conflicting data, regarding the ways that church involvement may be beneficial (or detrimental) for African-Americans. Further, the evangelism theme revealed in these narratives presents a third caveat of the study. Since the spread of Christianity (e.g., evangelism), irrespective of race or ethnicity, has been shown to be central to the Baptist heritage (Coalter; Jonas; Stankus), the presence of the evangelism theme may be intrinsically linked to the Baptist faith, and may hold less importance for other religious traditions. Given its limitations, however, few previous studies have specifically examined the perspectives of congregants, church staff, and the church pastor, so this represents a major strength of the current study.

Directions for Future Research

[60] DuBois has argued, "the preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil" (10). Therefore, because pastors and their staff are in a position to "interpret the overall purposes and values" of their congregations (Harris), future studies should examine the intrinsic role of these individuals in encouraging African-Americans to become involved in church organizations. Examples of questions that can lead this examination include, but are not limited to:

1. How do African-Americans become involved with their church organizations?

2. To what extent do African-Americans value compatibility between the leadership styles of the pastor and his/her church staff?

3. In what ways do pastors and church staff benefit from African-American church involvement?

4. During which life events are African-Americans more or less prone to become involved in their church organizations?

[61] Future studies should implement unidirectional models that examine the extent to which the mission of the church is influenced by congregant beliefs regarding which services the church should offer, or if congregant beliefs regarding services have any impact on the church mission. These models can lead to a greater understanding of the degree to which pastors expand upon church programs to meet the needs of individuals within the community. Furthermore, future studies should also examine the challenging and negative aspects of church involvement for African-Americans. Although the overwhelming majority of the research in this area has concentrated on the beneficial aspects of church involvement (Levin, Taylor, and Chatters; Taylor and Chatters 1988, 1991), more meaning-rich, qualitative studies may shed light on the specific ways that African-Americans may not feel supported by their church organizations. An examination of African-Americans who were once involved in their churches, but who have consciously removed themselves from these churches, begs for in-depth qualitative examination, as well. Given the complexity of church involvement, these elements are worthy of further examination.

Conclusions

[62] This paper is not an offering of evidence that the Black church is beneficial for many African-Americans. This topic has been expanded upon more broadly in previous research (Brodsky; Chalfant and Hellner; Chatters and Taylor; Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman; Haight; Levin 1984; Lincoln and Mamiya; Mosely-Howard and Evans; Picot, Debanne, Namazi, and Wykle; Steinitz; Taylor, Chatters and Levin; Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley and Caldwell; Williams; Wind and Lewis). The primary contribution of this paper is that it uses "language as the most appropriate window" to examine varying perspectives of congregants, church staff, and the church pastor, regarding why church involvement is beneficial for African-Americans.

[63] The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics requires social workers to be culturally competent in a number of areas, including issues involving religion. Through knowledge and understanding of the many ways that church involvement (religiosity) sustains African-Americans, service providers can better determine what African-American families need as well as create relationships with pastors and church staff, who can more easily disseminate these services. In addition to encouraging stronger alliances between social workers and African-American religious organizations, stronger collaborations can also be established between Black churches and other entities, such as individuals that collaborate with social service agencies and congregations, individuals that provide financial support for individuals and families, governmental agencies, educational institutions,

policymakers, as well as various religious groups that desire to partner with African-American churches. Building solid partnerships between social workers and church staff is especially important since previous research has found that during times of psychological stress, the most clinically trained mental health professionals (i.e., psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric social workers) were less popular than the clergy or medical doctors, and that clergy were, by far, the most frequently mentioned source of self-referral (Chalfant and Hellner). These studies seem to suggest that African-American religious organizations may be in a position to make positive contributions to the lives of individuals who choose to associate with them.

[64] Since many church-based service providers and program participants are African- American, many of the cultural walls that often inhibit effective service delivery and long-term participation by African-Americans can be greatly diminished (Levin 1986, 1984; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, and Lincoln). Many of these barriers include lack of transportation, mistrust of professionals, and in particular, European professionals, also, issues of cultural sensitivity and understanding and appropriateness of services. By involving Black churches as intermediary delivery systems, these barriers can be minimized. Over ten years ago, Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley and Caldwell identified church size and the educational level of the minister to be the strongest predictors of church-sponsored community health outreach. These results suggest the wisdom of public health professionals teaming with Black churches in their health promotion and disease prevention efforts.

[65] The visibility and stability of the Black church makes it an important part of a viable plan in the delivery of services in African-American communities. Pargament and Maton noted, "[a] community psychology interested in understanding and influencing the . . . needs of the disenfranchised in America needs to take seriously the central role of minority religion and of institutional religion in America" (18). African-Americans have created church communities in which the voice and power of their collective concerns could be freely expressed in ways that add meaning and vitality to their lives. This is a testimony to the power of the Black church and to those who choose to benefit from what the Black church has to offer.

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