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The "Black Experience" as Preparation for Participation in Global Partnerships

Abstract:

The lived experiences of African Americans, along with their reliance on God, serve as preparation for participation in global mission partnerships. The "Black Experience," characterized by suffering, dehumanization, violence, and survival has provided the African American community with a toolkit that can be used to teach others how to survive their own suffering as they too rely on God. Long-term African American missionaries have sent out a clarion call requesting that the African American church step up to the plate and join them in spreading the Gospel message "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

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Introduction

From the time Africans were brought across the Atlantic to America against their wishes, Black[1] people have been discriminated against simply because of the color of their skin. The "Black Experience" in America has been characterized by racial prejudice, dehumanization, oppression, inequality, exclusion, and violence perpetrated by the dominant White culture. The experiences of many Black people in the twenty-first century that hinder them from flourishing and living in *shalom* can be traced back to the institution of slavery. Socially constructed notions of race have been used to disenfranchise and marginalize, causing Africans and African Americans to experience life in a way that is uniquely different from every other people group on the continent (Priest 2007: 71).

In spite of the cruel and inhumane treatment they have endured, Black people not only learned to survive but also learned to thrive in the midst of suffering. Fundamental to their success has been faith in God and the central role of the "Black Church" (Wilmore 1998: 253-254). Because of their lived experiences, African Americans can relate to disenfranchised and marginalized people groups in other parts of the world in a way that White Americans cannot.

Interestingly, African American missionaries are few in number. A recurring theme among missionaries who have traveled the world has been "tell them [African Americans] to come" (Sutherland 2004: 500). While African Americans were more involved in global missions in the nineteenth century, factors such as colonization, the needs of African Americans at home during the Jim Crow era, and an ensuing lack of exposure to the ministry of global missions contributed to the markedly reduced participation of African Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Notwithstanding the aforementioned circumstances, now that the economic and social situations of African Americans have improved, though they are far from what God intends them to be, the biblical mandate in Acts 1:8 is still applicable to the African American Christian community: "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."[2]

Although many African Americans have not been exposed to global missions and missionaries to the same degree as their White counterparts, the African American experience itself has been preparation for engagement in global partnerships. Black people, through their lived experiences and reliance on God, can relate to and guide others through

their own experiences of oppression and their quest for liberation. In the following paragraphs, this paper will discuss what is meant by the "Black Experience." It will then discuss the Black Church and its involvement in community engagement. Thirdly, it will draw implications for how the lived experiences of African Americans in the United States (U.S.) is preparation for the Black Church's participation in global partnerships.

While there is much written about the Black Experience, my survey of the literature yielded few results on the relationship between the Black Experience and engagement in global partnerships. This research was born out of the current racial unrest in the U.S. and the emotional impact it has had on this African American who is called to global ministry. My own experiences as an African American, which do not begin to compare to those of my ancestors, nor do they compare to those of some of my contemporaries, have caused me to reflect on how the Black Experience prepares my people for participation in global missions.

The Black Experience: The Horizontal Encounter

While the "Black Experience" refers in one sense to the collective history of Africans and African Americans in the U.S., it is actually multivalent. Because Black people and Black culture are not a monolith, the Black Experience is defined differently by different people. What is generally agreed upon, however, is that the Black Experience is rooted in the cultural hegemony of White racist America. Drawing on the work of Black Liberation theologians, Womanist theologian Delores Williams provides a helpful framework for thinking about the Black Experience. She observes that the Black Experience was born out of racial oppression and suggests that Black Liberation theology presents the Black Experience as being holistic in nature and having four parts: the horizontal encounter, the vertical encounter, transformations of consciousness, and an epistemological process (Williams 1993: 135-136). Due to the limitations of this paper, only the horizontal and vertical encounters will be addressed. Further, because the Black Experience is such a broad topic, the confines of this paper do not allow for every aspect of the topic to be discussed. Therefore, the topics to be discussed will be limited to the Black Experience as it relates to civil rights, violence, and the wealth gap.

The horizontal encounter of the Black Experience refers to interactions between Black and White groups in a sociohistorical context. Regarding these encounters Williams writes,

> The interaction results in negative and/or positive
> relationships and sociopolitical situations. Most often
> the encounter between blacks and whites is described
> negatively in black liberation theology. From this
> encounter, suffering has become a characteristic of
> African American life. (1993: 136)

One need only conduct a brief survey of African American history to
understand why suffering is synonymous with the Black Experience. There
has never been a time in U.S. history when African Americans were not
treated as second class citizens.

Civil Rights

The United States Declaration of Independence (U.S. 1776)
declares, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created
equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable
Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."
Sadly, these "truths" have not been equally applied to Africans and African
Americans. In fact, in the article "Slavery Unwilling to Die," sociologist Joe
Feagin addresses the plight of Black people in America in the twentieth
century, arguing that their struggles had roots in the institution of slavery.
From the 1600s through 1865, because the enslaved were thought of
as property rather than persons, they were denied the basic rights and
freedoms that White Americans enjoyed. Black people were prohibited by
law from earning an income or getting an education. They were denied
the right to citizenship and therefore were not allowed to vote. They were
not allowed to own property nor could they legally marry. "They were the
only racial or ethnic group explicitly signed out in the U.S. Constitution
for subordination and enslavement" (1986: 175). Even after being made
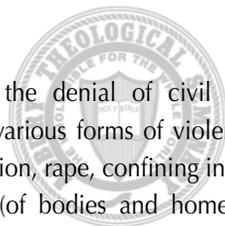citizens, African Americans continued to be denied their civil rights.

During the Reconstruction era (1863–1877), it seemed that
African Americans were on their way to realizing the dream of being
full U.S. citizens with all the rights and privileges thereof. However, the
dream soon became a nightmare with the "Compromise of 1877." Political
and economic gains achieved during Reconstruction were immediately
reversed, particularly in the South, with the establishment of "Jim Crow,"
a legal system of racial subordination and segregation. The ideology of
White supremacy was stronger than ever. From the late 1800s until the
1960s, legalized segregation deprived African Americans of the rights

and freedoms they had come to enjoy. The right to vote was taken away. Economic exploitation was rampant. Families were forced off their land. Access to public spaces was denied. "States and local communities passed legislation prohibiting the races from working together in the same room, using the same entrances, stairways, drinking fountains, and toilets. Blacks were excluded from public institutions such as theatres, auditoriums, parks, and residential neighborhoods" (Wilmore 1998: 167).

Acts of intimidation and outright violence were used to enforce discriminatory laws. A 2017 report from the Equal Justice Initiative indicates that 4,425 African Americans were lynched between 1877 and 1950 for things such as resisting mistreatment, allegations of crime, and minor violations of social customs and expectations such as accidentally bumping into someone or referring to a White person by their name without using a title (Lynching in America 2017). Jim Crow ended in 1964 with the passing of the Civil Rights Act; however, institutionalized discrimination and subordination did not. Racism did not end but simply evolved from overt individual and institutional racism to "respectable racism." Respectable racism is expressed in coded language which "substitutes terms describing racial identity with seemingly race-neutral terms that disguise explicit and/or implicit racial animus . . . that triggers racial stereotypes and other negative associations without the stigma of explicit racism . . . and dehumanizes people of communities of color" (National Education Association: 25). Today, African Americans are treated inequitably when interacting with the police, with the justice system, in the labor market, in education, when trying to purchase or rent a home, in politics (voter suppression), in the provision of healthcare, and the list goes on. In the year 2021, African Americans are still fighting for equality.

Violence

In addition to the denial of civil rights, African Americans have been subjected to various forms of violence and abuse. Whipping, branding, public humiliation, rape, confining in stocks, lynching, shooting, drowning, and burning (of bodies and homes) were just some of the means by which Whites exercised authority and control over the enslaved. Although the enslaved were beaten to within an inch of their lives, lynching was uncommon before Emancipation because the slave masters wanted to preserve the free labor. Slavery's system of dehumanization and exploitation inflicted untold amounts of suffering to encourage obedience and deter

rebellious behavior. While all slave masters and overseers were not tyrants, the enslaved had no legal protection from those who were. In fact, "law enforcement" was often either actively involved or standing silently by as heinous acts of violence were being perpetrated.

Additionally, African Americans have been victims of organized acts of violence perpetrated by angry White mobs. One such incident that is currently receiving a great deal of attention as its one hundredth anniversary is currently being observed is the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921.[3] In what was the costliest race riot in U.S. history, within a period of eighteen hours White rioters decimated the prosperous Greenwood neighborhood. Nationally recognized for its thriving business district, the majority of Tulsa's African American population lived in this affluent area that had come to be known as "Black Wall Street." The community's prosperity was perceived as a threat to White hegemony, thereby exacerbating feelings of hostility toward African Americans.

Mobs of angry White people descended upon and obliterated the Greenwood District. Approximately five hundred regular citizens were deputized by the police, some of whom were given guns, to assist them in "maintaining control" of the situation (Messer 2018: 799). The fox was guarding the henhouse. Some, if not most, of those who were deputized possessed that same spirit of hostility that incited the massacre. Attacks on Greenwood were carried out from the ground and the air. Private aircraft were deployed to drop bombs on the neighborhood. Armed rioters prevented the fire department from putting out fires. When all was said and done, thirty-five square blocks of Greenwood were in ruins. An estimated $1.8 million in real estate was demolished. In today's market, the value would be approximately $150 million. This does not include the value of commercial property, cash assets, and personal belongings. Total damages, then, could have amounted to more than $200 million. Although only 36 deaths were officially reported (26 African Americans and ten Whites), experts estimate that three hundred African Americans were killed. Many of the bodies were buried in mass graves or thrown into the Arkansas River. Eight hundred people were injured. Five thousand were interned. And thousands were left homeless (Messer 2018: 801-807). Greenwood residents were never compensated for their losses, and the community was never able to return to its former glory. Those events have had long-lasting economic and social implications. Specifically, they contribute to the problem of poverty today and the consequences that come along

with it: food insecurity, unemployment or underemployment, inadequate education, inadequate healthcare, substandard housing and homelessness, and other forms of social discrimination.

Today, North Tulsa (where the Greenwood District is located) is one of the poorest areas in the city. Writing for *Human Rights Watch*, Brian Root reports that North Tulsa has "poorer residents, higher rates of unemployment, and lower life expectancies" than any other area of the city (Policing, Poverty, and Racial Inequality 2019). While 17 percent of Tulsa's residents are African American, 41 percent of the African American population lives in North Tulsa. There the poverty rate is 45 percent (34 percent for all African Americans) compared to thirteen percent for White citizens. Further, Root describes Tulsa as "a case study in abusive, overly aggressive policing" (Policing 2019). Residents in North Tulsa are stopped more frequently and for longer periods of time by the police. They are more likely to be removed from their vehicles and searched. And they are arrested more frequently than residents in other parts of the city. "The confluence of race, poverty, and crime," says Root, "calls for inquiry into the larger question of structural racism" (Policing 2019).

Unfortunately, the situation in Tulsa is not unique. African Americans across the country are having similar experiences as that of residents in Tulsa. It is reprehensible that 150 years after the abolition of slavery, African Americans are still experiencing systemic discrimination and abuse. The level to which overt racism has reared its ugly head is evidence that we do not live in a post-racial society as some would like to believe. It is this history of violence, exploitation, and abuse against them that compels African Americans to rise up in protest against individual and institutional racism in its various forms.

Wealth Gap

In addition to violence, poverty is a problem from which African Americas have suffered throughout the nation's history. Sadly, the economic inequality that existed in the Antebellum Period has implications for African Americans today. As hard as enslaved persons were forced to work from sunup to sundown, their labor was never for their own benefit. Instead, it was on the backs of enslaved persons that America's capitalist economy was built. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, African Americans found themselves being subjected to a system of semi-slavery that included tenant farming, sharecropping, and debt peonage. Superexploitation was the order

of the day. Because of the exploitative practices of landowners, most of the newly freed persons could not pay their way out of debt, rendering them unable to participate in the capitalist economy they helped to create. For them, freedom and upward mobility was nothing but an illusion.

The surest way of achieving upward mobility at that time was land ownership. While enslaved persons were prohibited from owning land, President Lincoln signed into law the Homestead Act of 1862. As part of the plan for westward expansion, this act allowed primarily White Americans and immigrants to acquire 160 acres of public land for $1.25 per acre. In exchange, they were required to improve the land for five years before filing for the deed of ownership. "In a sense, the government was not simply giving away land, but rather the opportunity for upward mobility and a more secure future for oneself and one's children" (Shanks 2005: 24). Through this government program, an estimated 270 million acres of public land were distributed to 1.5 million households (Homestead Act of 1862). African Americans and White Americans, however, did not benefit equally from this land ownership program. Although the language of the Homestead Act did not exclude free Blacks from participating in the program, they were often met with obstacles that hindered them from participating.

Because enslaved persons were not considered citizens, the approximately 4 million enslaved Americans were excluded from this financial boon (U.S. Census Bureau 1860). After the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, they were technically free. However, the ability of this newly freed population to take advantage of this land ownership program largely depended on their location and the attitude of the local leadership toward them. Most African Americans, particularly in the South, were confronted with the "Black Codes," laws passed by southern legislatures between 1865 and 1866 that were designed not only to restrict the freedoms of African Americans but also as a means of securing cheap labor (Wallach 2005: 113). Consequently, even though the language of the Homestead Act was inclusive, making it legally possible for African Americans to apply for public land, rarely was it possible for them to do so because of racist policies and practices.

If land ownership was what allowed families to build wealth and leave a legacy for their descendants, one can begin to see why a wealth gap exists between African Americans and White Americans today. Further, one can see why immigrants could come to America and build wealth, while during that same time African Americans did not. Immigrants were

given advantages that were denied African Americans. African Americans are perhaps the only people group in the U.S. who were challenged with building wealth for their families by starting with effectively nothing. "Most blacks, unlike most White immigrant groups, found themselves in an agricultural society with no access to the resources of wealth" (Feagin 1986: 181). Sadly, racial discrimination as it relates to land ownership did not end there. It continued throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

Sociologist Kevin Gotham addresses racist practices related to urban housing. He argues that key leaders in the nascent real estate industry, in conjunction with housing reformers and social workers, were instrumental in creating segregated neighborhoods. With the emergence of the modern real estate industry and the creation of racially restrictive covenants, real estate elites promulgated a segregationist ideology that equated the residential presence of Blacks with neighborhood instability and declining property values (2000: 618). Further, racially restrictive covenants executed between property owners and neighborhood associations prohibited property owners from selling or leasing their properties to certain ethnic groups, particularly African Americans. According to Gotham, estimates indicate that racially restrictive covenants were involved in more than half of the new subdivisions constructed in the U.S. between 1900 and 1948. It was in 1948 when the covenants were declared unenforceable by the U.S. Supreme Court. Legislation, however, did not change the hearts of people. Racist practices continued to restrict African Americans from purchasing homes in areas that were designated as "White neighborhoods."

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a New Deal program, also contributed to the poverty of African Americans. From the agency's beginnings in 1934 until the 1950s, in its Underwriting Manual, African Americans and other people of color were referred to as "adverse influences" on property values. Agents were instructed not to insure mortgages unless the restrictive covenant which "prohibited the occupancy of properties except by the race for which they are intended" was in place (Underwriting Manual Section 980.3.g.). Since White people had never thought of themselves as "adverse influences," this clearly was a reference to African Americans and persons of other ethnicities. Either African Americans were refused loans, or they became the victims of predatory lending practices. They were offered loans with extremely high interest rates which they usually ended up defaulting on or which kept them in debt for the rest of their

lives. The practice of refusing loans to certain people groups or in certain neighborhoods in order to maintain property values and for controlling the movement of African Americans and other people of color became known as "redlining." Banks and mortgage lenders used a color-coded map to determine whether or not loans would be issued. Areas shaded in red—typically African American or predominantly African American neighborhoods—were considered undesirable. Persons who lived in or wanted to purchase homes in red-shaded areas were usually denied loans. Areas shaded in green were the most affluent White neighborhoods. They, of course, received preferential treatment. Intermediate neighborhoods which were likely to be occupied by lower-income White persons were shaded in blue or yellow.

While the FHA was channeling Whites to suburban subdivisions, African Americans were being pushed into urban housing projects. Housing authorities cleared away homes owned by African Americans, stripping them of their assets and any future appreciation of land values and replaced them with rowhouses and apartment buildings. As Whites fled the city to the suburbs, White landlords bought up many of those properties and rented them to African Americans. Now renters rather than homeowners, and instead of building wealth for themselves and their descendants, African Americans were contributing to the wealth of others. Further, these urban neighborhoods did not receive the same care and attention from public authorities as the suburban neighborhoods. Schools were neglected, building and street maintenance was not provided, and garbage collection services were ignored. Absentee landlords did not provide proper maintenance for their rental properties. Consequently, due to urban neighborhood disinvestment, African Americans found themselves paying high rents as they experienced urban decay.

Redlining contributed to the wealth gap that exists today. Although the FHA would eventually remove the racist language from its manual in the 1950s and redlining would become illegal, like slavery, the effects linger on. Today, African Americans are still being turned away for mortgage loans at significantly higher rates than Whites and are victims of predatory lending practices at higher rates. Plus, they are once again being displaced by gentrification. Public housing projects are being demolished, and new housing developments and retail spaces are being built that are too expensive for current residents to afford. While development itself is not a bad thing, it becomes bad when it is done in a way that all persons cannot benefit

equitably from it. According to a report from the Brookings Institution, the net worth of a typical Black family ($17,150) is approximately ten times less than that of a typical White family ($171,000). This gap in net worth "reflects a society that has not and does not afford equality of opportunity to all its citizens . . . as well as differences in power and opportunity that can be traced back to the nation's inception" (McIntosh, et al. 2020). While African Americans have always attempted to build wealth, their progress has been impeded. The knee of a capitalist economy that their ancestors were forced to build has always been on African American necks.

Frederick Douglass spoke truth when he said, "Of all the races . . . which have suffered from this feeling [prejudice], the colored people of this country have endured most. They can resort to no disguises which will enable them to escape its deadly aim. They carry in front the evidence which marks them for persecution …. They are negroes—and that is enough, in the eye of this unreasoning prejudice, to justify indignity and violence" (The Color Line 1881). Yet, in spite of the suffering, in spite of the indignities and injustices, African Americans have found ways to thrive and even survive.

The Black Church: The Vertical Encounter

The vertical encounter of the Black Experience refers to ways in which oppressed people have experienced relationship with God. Regarding the vertical encounter, Williams says this relationship "not only results in the creation of sustaining and nurturing cultural forms, like black religion, but the oppressed also achieve positive psychological and physical states of freedom and liberation" (Williams 1993: 136). Fundamental to the survival of African Americans in the midst of suffering has been the Black Church. The following paragraphs will discuss the history of the Black Church and its role in helping African Americans survive and even thrive in spite of the violence and oppression they have endured.

When speaking about the "Black Church," most scholars are referring collectively to the seven historically Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990: 1). These denominations have their origins in what E. Franklin Frazier identified as the "invisible institution" that

emerged from the institution of slavery. The invisible institution refers to the secret worship services held by enslaved persons. Disgusted by the gospel presented by their masters' preachers, the enslaved would steal away to brush arbors ("hush arbors") and hold secret meetings "in the backwoods and bayous of plantations, and sometimes in their own slave quarters" (1990: 8). Some were forbidden to attend church or, in some cases, even to pray. Yet at the risk of being flogged they attended these secret gatherings where they prayed for freedom (Raboteau 2004: 213).[4]

The religion of the enslaved was unique in that it was born out of their experience of oppression in captivity and their need for freedom. The need for freedom caused the enslaved to find inspiration in the biblical story of the Exodus. The Israelites' exodus from Egypt helped them make sense of their own experience. The religion of the enslaved was unique in that they reinterpreted western Christianity (as opposed to biblical Christianity) which promoted the inferiority of the enslaved. They affirmed their own view of the faith, which rejected the notion of inferiority and affirmed Jesus' identification with the suffering of the oppressed. Their religion was unique in that it held on to elements of their African heritage. Unlike western Christianity, they did not make a distinction between the sacred and the secular. And it was unique in its style of worship. Their worship, which consisted of preaching, dancing, shouting, and the singing of what has become known as Negro Spirituals, was unlike that of their White Christian counterparts. The idea that Christianity is "the White man's religion" must be unequivocally rejected. A survey of the Bible and the history of Christianity demonstrates that Christianity in Africa dates back to the foundation of the Christian church. Further, Africans were highly instrumental in establishing the doctrines and theology on which the Christian church stands today. African Americans would do well to reject the western Christianity they have imbibed and embrace the multiethnic, multicultural Christianity found within the pages of scripture.

According to Albert Raboteau, a specialist in American religious history, it was not until the Great Awakening in the 1740s that there was a real emphasis placed on converting enslaved persons to Christianity. Until then, relatively few had been instructed in the faith (2004: 126). As indicated by the seven historically Black denominations, Methodists and Baptists gained the largest number of converts. Although Black and White Christians were worshiping in the same spaces, that did not mean those assemblies

were truly integrated. In fact, it was discrimination and oppression in the house of God that compelled Black Methodists to establish the first African American religious denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1787 at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, African American congregants were forced to sit in the church's newly built gallery instead of the seats where they usually sat. Additionally, Rev. Absalom Jones, an African American man who was kneeling at the altar praying during worship, was forced to leave the altar. Under the leadership of Rev. Richard Allen, not only did Jones leave the altar, he and all of the African American congregants left the building, never to return again. They secured a temporary place where they would worship on their own. After several years of planning, collaboration with the African American community and fundraising, Allen purchased land. And in 1794, Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church, affectionately known today as Mother Bethel, was dedicated by Bishop Francis Asbury. In 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was established as a completely separate denomination with Allen being ordained as the first bishop (Jaynes 2005: 28). Prior to the exodus at St. George's, Allen had already considered the possibility of a church staffed by African Americans for the African American Methodist community. St. George's, he believed, did not meet the spiritual needs of the African Americans. Allen favored a socially conscious church that promoted liberation and equality for African Americans.

While all African American Christians do not share all of the same beliefs and practices, there are many points of doctrinal and ritual commonality that exist within the Black Church. Black Liberation theologian James Cone contends that theology which arises from the oppression of African Americans is unlike that found in White theological textbooks. "Instead of asking whether the Bible is infallible, black people want to know . . . whether the God to which it bears witness is present in their struggle" (1986: 11). As the Black Church arose out of Black people's experience with suffering, liberation and suffering emerged as primary theological themes of the Black Church. "Any theology that takes liberation seriously must also take seriously the continued presence of suffering in black life" (1986: 12). Cone contends that the Bible is the story of God liberating the oppressed from economic and political oppression. Using the biblical story of Hagar, which includes poverty, domestic violence, sexual and economic exploitation, single-parenting, and homelessness, to help African American women have confidence and find hope in their own experiences, Delores

Williams posits an alternative view. She contends that God does not always liberate from oppression. Instead, there are times when God participates in the survival of oppression. Williams says about Hagar, "God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before" (1993: 4). Williams argues that God participated in Hagar's development by helping her attain a suitable quality of life. While God did not liberate Hagar, God did not abandon her and leave her to her own devices. As God was with Hagar in the midst of her suffering, Williams contends that God is with God's people in the midst of their suffering.

One of the ways God has worked to liberate and/or participate in the survival of God's people is through the Black Church. "Our churches were rescue missions and survival stations on an underground route to freedom and dignity. The theology that thundered from the pulpits on Sundays was less concerned about how to understand the first three articles of the Nicene Creed than about faith, hope, and love and their relevance to obtaining the next three meals" (Wilmore 1985: 361). Black churches have an extensive history of addressing the social as well as spiritual needs of persons in oppressed communities. Grass-roots efforts in which even small churches can participate include cash assistance and food distribution programs (survival). Programs that meet more long-term needs, promote upward mobility, and advocate economic self-sufficiency include the development of educational institutions, the creation of senior-citizen housing developments, and the creation of micro-loan programs or credit unions (liberation). These programs tend to be undertaken by megachurches. The establishment of such programs is nothing new for the Black Church.

> During Jim Crow the church became the entity which financed schools, banks, insurance companies, and other crucial organizations needed by African Americans. During the Civil Rights Movement the church became the spokesman for promoting a self-help doctrine which served as a catalyst for civil rights. This self-help doctrine espoused by the church in practice represented oppositional politics and created an environment conducive for social change. (Littlefield 2005: 691)

Not only is the Black Church a religious institution, it is also a social, political, and economic institution. Every critical juncture in African American history that contributed to the survival and liberation of African

American people (e.g., Civil Rights, the establishment of historically black colleges and universities, the abolition of slavery) has occurred with the cooperation of the Black Church. While the Black Church does not engage society politically today to the extent that it did in the Civil Rights era, it continues to address social and economic needs. Because they have the resources, it is the Black megachurch that invests the most financially in the community.

Just as African Americans make up approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population, roughly 12 percent of the 1250 megachurches (150) in the U.S. are predominantly African American (Thumma and Travis 2007: 28). Megachurches are commonly defined as churches that average at least 2000 persons weekly in worship attendance. Writing about Black megachurch culture, sociologist Sandra Barnes, who has a particular interest in urban sociology, says these churches tend to have Black charismatic senior pastors, they make extensive use of technology, their services are televised, and they offer "cafeteria-style" programs (2010: 15). Cafeteria-style programs refer to the numerous programs offered in response to identified needs. For the most part, these megachurches are either independent churches or they are associated with self-governing denominations.

Barnes explores how Black megachurches use cultural tools (e.g., worship, theology, racial beliefs, programmatic efforts, etc.) to "educate, re-educate, and empower persons to expect spiritual and material abundance," though not in the sense that is preached in the Prosperity Gospel (2010: 2-3). Her study, which includes primary data from thirty-one Black megachurches and secondary data on Black small, moderately sized and megachurches from churches across the nation is informed by Cultural theory and Black Church history. Barnes acknowledges that rather than an exhaustive study, her analysis offers insight into the inner workings of a cross-section of Black megachurches (2010: 4).

Barnes notes that regardless of denomination, the churches that participated in her study were reflective of the historic Black Church in their provision of ministries and programs that respond to the social ills that affect a disproportionate percentage of Black Americans. They work proactively to combat crises related to poverty, housing, healthcare, incarceration, single parenting, unemployment, and underemployment. Education and empowerment are made available through various means (2010: 28). In addition to worship and Christian education, seminars on social justice, personal capacity building, developing strategic partnerships, and realizing

upward mobility are just some of the workshops and trainings that are made available (2010: 157). Ultimately, what they hope to convey is a vision of success, spiritually and materially. Through Spirit-filled yet practical teaching and preaching, pastors and church leaders seek to communicate to the congregation that God's favor rests upon the children of God. Therefore, the congregants' lives should be shaped around their profession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. And while spiritual blessings are guaranteed, there is the possibility of material blessings, but ultimately material blessings are determined by God. While some pastors embraced the Prosperity Gospel, that was not true for most in Barnes' study (2010: 48).

Barnes highlights the ministries of sixteen churches, demonstrating the scope of the work these megachurches are doing in their communities. Due to the confines of this paper, one of those churches will be featured here—The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York, located in Jamaica Queens (2010: 143). The mission of Greater Allen is as follows:

> to effectively minister the Word of God to the people of God through biblical teaching, preaching, and outreach. We believe that we are called to address the needs of the total person, as our Savior did. We will energize one another towards personal transformation and participation in Christ's call to apostolic mission. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will expand the Kingdom of God by lifting the name of Jesus in our community and in an ever changing world through our commitment to study, worship, stewardship, evangelism, social justice, and economic development ("Our Mission").

Greater Allen's mission statement is consistent with Barnes' description of the ethos and praxis of Black megachurches. This 23,000-member church has more than sixty clubs and organizations that minister to those within the Greater Allen family and the Jamaica Queens community. Outreach ministries include, but are not limited to, street ministry, domestic violence ministry, job training/employment assistance ministry, social justice ministry, AIDS/HIV ministry, recovery ministry, feeding ministry, cancer support ministry, and the Caribbean International Ministry. Many of these programs are operated in partnership with other community agencies. According to the church's website, Greater Allen and its subsidiary corporations operate on an annual budget of over $34 million. The church owns both commercial and residential developments, a 600-student private school,

and a number of commercial and social service enterprises. In addition to the massive amount of work Greater Allen is doing in Queens, their Development Corporation website indicates that they have funded 2,039 water projects. While it is not indicated where those projects are located, content on the website does include information about the need for clean water in Africa. More information about Greater Allen's global missions would be beneficial in assessing the impact of their global ministry. Clearly, Greater Allen has much to offer to the global church.

The work of Greater Allen and churches like it undoubtedly benefits the communities in which they are located. Certainly, Black megachurches have greater economic and human resources to serve their communities, but Black churches large and small contribute to the communities around them. It is not uncommon for churches of all sizes to enter into partnerships with other churches or community agencies to meet the needs of the oppressed in their communities. This paper suggests that the Black Church's robust history of service, in conjunction with its history of reliance on God in the midst of oppression and suffering (the Black Experience), is preparation for participation in global partnerships.

Global Partnerships

While the number of long-term missionaries of African American descent is small, the number of African American churches participating in short-term missions is growing. African American missionary David Cornelius contests the belief of American Christians (does he mean White American?) that African Americans are not interested in global missions. Their observation, he says, is based on the low number of African American missionaries participating in long-term missions and the lack of emphasis placed on missions in African American churches collectively. Cornelius goes on to say, "While the observations are accurate, the conclusions are not necessarily true. Many African Americans are interested in international missions and the mandate to make disciples of all nations. African Americans have (historically) and continue to be (at an accelerating rate) involved in international missions" (2009: 47).

Of the sixteen megachurches featured in Barnes' book, only one church profile included information related to global missions. However, a search of the churches' websites and Facebook pages revealed that six of the sixteen reported having an international ministry. Two of the six had pictures from their mission trips on their Facebook pages—one was in

2016 to Kenya, and the other was in 2019 to Guatemala. A third church's website showed they were scheduled to go to Haiti in June of 2020 and the Dominican Republic in July of 2020. Most likely those trips were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A fourth church's website indicated they made a trip to South Africa in 2013. There was no information available concerning ongoing communication or commitments. While that is just over a third of the churches in Barnes' study, this result demonstrates the problem with trying to quantify African American participation in global missions. Reliable statistics simply are not available. Churches are participating whose numbers are not being reported.

Although African Americans make up approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population, and though approximately 12 percent of U.S. megachurches are predominately African American, fewer than one percent of U.S. long-term missionaries (those who serve two years or more) are of African American descent (Johnson 2006: 63). For this reason, when it comes to its participation in cross-cultural world missions, the Black Church has been described as "the sleeping giant" (Johnson 2006: 85). However, African American missionary Leonidas Johnson believes that the Black Church is God's "battle axe." Reflecting upon how the Black Experience has prepared the Black Church to fulfill God's missionary call, Johnson writes,

> It took a while for us to gather enough experience of being cast down, rejected and cast out of mainstream society. It took a while to gather enough experience of being treated as a second-class citizen. It took a while to gather enough experience of being lynched, set afire, and denied basic human rights simply because of the color of our skin. It took a while to gather enough experience to try and prove that the nonviolent civil rights movement was the right path to justice and moral and social change. It took a while to gather the experience of what it meant to be black living in America. But we got what it takes now. In fact we got more than enough in our account to take care of God's business. (2006: 85-86)

Johnson and many others are convinced that even though African Americans have not participated in global missions to a large extent over the last century African Americans have been uniquely equipped through their lived experiences for the work of global missions. This section will discuss the gifts African Americans bring and, secondly, a strategy for deploying those gifts in global partnerships.

Gift: Skin Color

The words of W.E.B. Du Bois spoken in 1903 are just as true today as they were then. "The problem of the twentieth century is the color-line" (Du Bois 2019: 25). (As my mother would say, "Ain't nothing changed but the date.") While the color of Black people's skin has been looked upon as a curse, creating cultural barriers in the U.S., it eliminates barriers in other countries thereby opening doors for missions. Johnson comments that "some of the remaining more resistant people groups view Anglo-Saxon Americans as representative of arrogant Western Imperialism" (2006: 87). Suggesting that African Americans are culturally closer to Ethiopians than White Americans, Johnson argues that the Black Church has a critical role to play in evangelizing North Africa and mobilizing Ethiopian missionaries to Arabia. There are some places that African Americans can go that White Americans cannot, at least not as easily, simply because of the color of their skin.

Gift: Experience with Suffering

Secondly, because much of the world is aware of the oppression and suffering that is part and parcel of the Black Experience, people who are experiencing oppression in other parts of the world want to hear the story of how God delivered African Americans and how they have survived even in the midst of suffering. It is precisely because of the Black Experience that African Americans can relate to the sufferings of other people groups around the world. Indeed, the African American story of overcoming and living to tell is reminiscent of Joseph's testimony in Genesis 50:20 in which he says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." That is not to suggest that God caused slavery or the suffering that occurred during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras or the inequality and injustices that continue to occur today. Rather, it is to say that God can bring some good out of the vilest of circumstances. The Black Church was born out of the need for survival and liberation. Its strategies for survival and liberation are deeply rooted in both the Old and New Testaments of scripture. African Americans have a story to tell. They can share their experiences of relying on God to endure and overcome suffering to lead others to faith in the Triune God.

Gift: Style of Worship

Thirdly, the Black Church's unique style of worship is in itself an avenue for global missions. In describing the Black Church, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya assert that "Black churches are institutions that are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions" (1990: 228). One of the six dialectical tensions they identify is that of between "other-worldly" and "this-worldly." While "other-worldly" is concerned with heaven and the afterlife or the world beyond, "this-worldly" is concerned with the here and now (politics, social life). For the Black Church, focus on the other-worldly does not automatically lead to the neglect of the here and now and focus on the here and now does not lead to the neglect of the other-worldly. In other words, like many cultures in the Majority World, the Black Church does not bifurcate the sacred and the secular. The Black Church's focus on the activity of the Holy Spirit is a means by which to relate to cultures that emphasize the spirit world.

The Black Church's dialectical tension between this-worldly and other-worldly is revealed in the Negro Spiritual. Raboteau writes, "Important though it is to recognize that the spiritual sometimes expressed the slaves' desire for freedom in this world as well as in the next, it is at least as important to understand the profound connection between the other world and this world in the religious consciousness of the slaves" (2004: 250). People around the world enjoy listening to Negro Spirituals, which tell stories of liberation and freedom in heaven and on earth. People around the world also enjoy listening to the soulful sound of Black gospel music. Richard Coleman, an African American missionary and mission expert, contends that Black gospel choirs have a unique opportunity to contribute to global missions. In a 2010 press release, Coleman described African Americans as "uniquely poised to have a big impact on global evangelism" as Black gospel is very popular in places like Poland, Japan, and Sweden (African American Churches Called On). Indeed, Black gospel is an African American art form that has spread throughout the world and is a powerful tool for spreading the Good News. African American churches with gifted choirs or community choirs could be mobilized to spread the Gospel through song and perhaps also engage in ministries that meet physical needs.

Gift: Experience in Urban Ministry

A final way that many African American churches are equipped for participation in global missions is their engagement in urban ministry within their own communities. Johnson asserts that the African American church's adeptness in urban community-based ministry is a specialized strength and a growing need in world mission (2006: 55, 58). Black churches of all sizes participate in food and clothing banks as well as provide cash assistance. Megachurches offer these and more extensive community and economic development programs. Skills, energy, and resources used locally can be transferred to the global context. After all, the mandate to go and make disciples extends beyond Jerusalem to all the world. It is a both/and rather than an either/or proposition.

The community and economic development at which many African American megachurches have become proficient falls under the umbrella of what Bryant Myers describes as "transformational development." Myers' transformational development model is holistic in nature, focusing on the spiritual, social, psychological, and material dimensions of life, with the goal of creating positive change in the lives of those who experience poverty (2011: 3). Further, Myers' approach is built on the premise that the spiritual and material dimensions of life should not be bifurcated. This is consistent with the theology of the Black Church and the culture of many Majority World countries. Like the Black megachurches discussed earlier, Myers believes that God is concerned about all of life's situations (spiritual and physical); that the church is called to evangelism, discipleship, advocacy, and justice; and that the church is called to uphold the dignity of all persons, male and female. This suggests that African American churches that participate in urban ministry are equipped to engage in transformational development in the context of global missions. However, this is not to suggest that no additional preparation is needed. Given the need for additional preparation, and given that churches are more likely to participate in short-term missions (even in the case of persons seeking to become long-term missionaries), a case is to be made for global partnerships.

Strategy for Entering into Global Partnerships

When thinking of entering into global partnerships, it is important to first take the posture of a learner and become culturally competent.

Cultural competence—the ability to communicate and work effectively with persons from other cultures—is essential because even in short-term missions there is always the potential of doing more harm than good when communication is poor and relationships are weak. Cross-cultural specialist Mary Lederleitner states, "In global missions there is a history of paternalistic behavior steeped in a false sense of superiority. . . Along the way many have been hurt, sometimes quite unintentionally, despite good intentions and a desire to do the will of God" (2010: 125). Lederleitner says paternalism can be avoided in global partnerships, first, by identifying and greatly valuing all the resources that both partners bring to the table. This will prevent favoring the partner who brings the most financial resources to the partnership. Secondly, it will be important to develop a means by which both parties are held accountable to the partnership. This will ensure that each has the opportunity to learn from the other. Thirdly, any remnants of a culture of silence must be ended. Communication must flow in both directions. And, fourthly, when offenses do occur, "forgive and remember so lasting change can take place." Change takes time. So, when offended be willing to forgive. And it is important for the offending party to remain alert to offensive behaviors so as not to continue repeating those same behaviors (2010: 125-130).

Lisa Pelt, an African American missionary who served in Nigeria, suggests that the Black Experience in America gives African American missionaries a unique perspective when working with persons in the nonwestern world. For instance, she notes that African American missionaries might be offended by the exclusivism that occurs on the mission field. Although the days of hospitals, schools, and compounds being restricted are gone in many parts of the world, "the missionary subculture still excludes national Christians from many activities and conveniences in subtle ways" (Pelt 2009: 82). Pelt notes that while White American missionaries have to be told such behavior is offensive, African Americans who have a history of being excluded, may already sense that the behavior is offensive.

Another problem that sometimes occurs on the mission field is what has been referred to as the "White savior complex," the need for westerners to fix problems without first understanding what the problems are. An example involves a "multicultural" short-term mission team from an evangelical seminary in Kentucky serving at an orphanage in a village in India.

One day the host reported to the team that the team's laundry was not ready to be returned to them as expected because "the dryer broke." Rather than trying to understand the problem, some of the team members immediately went into problem-solving mode. Their first assumption was that the poor people could not afford to repair or replace their dryer. Their second assumption was that they should "pass the hat" and come up with the money to buy a new dryer. In fairness, maybe they were just trying to be nice. Either way, the immediate response of some of the White Americans was "How much does a dryer cost? We can buy a dryer." The team members assumed that the women at the orphanage dried their clothes the same way they did. It turned out the host was trying to be funny when he said, "The dryer broke." What he meant was the sun had not been shining, therefore their clothes had not had time to dry. After washing the clothes by hand, the clothes were then hung on a clothesline to dry. The lone African American on the team got the joke. To this day, fifteen years later, she is appalled by the assumptions of her team members and the fact that they had not been observant of what was going on around them. On a previous occasion during the team's stay, the women at the orphanage had done laundry on the rooftop and had hung the laundry on clotheslines to dry. The African American woman still wonders why her team had not noticed the clothes hanging on the clotheslines.[5] While this might seem small, it begs the question what other things might have been said or done that might have been received as offensive to the hosts?

Although African Americans have some things naturally working in their favor when it comes to participating in global partnerships, there are still cultural differences that exist between African Americans and other people groups. African Americans are still *Americans*. Therefore, additional preparation is advisable and even necessary. TMS Global, a missions organization in Norcross, Georgia, has recently instituted Thrive, a program that offers a practical way for American pastors to enter into partnerships with pastors in other parts of the world. Since the program began just last year (2020), it has not existed long enough to extrapolate data regarding its success. However, its paradigm is consistent with much of what Lederleitner recommends in terms of being successful in global partnerships. According to their website, Thrive's partnership paradigm "equips American and international pastors with the skills to thrive in ministry through cross-cultural dialogue, relationship building, skill building

workshops, and immersion experiences in each other's communities ….
The goal is to reduce attrition and to provide pastors with the skills needed
to thrive holistically in order to more effectively join Jesus in the call to
fulfill the Great Commission" (TMS Thrive 2020). This kind of training and
guided communication allows for healthy, trusting relationships built on
mutuality and reciprocity. Relationships such as these allow hosts to relay
in an honest way how Americans can bring the gifts they have to offer and
use them for the glory of God and the good of the people, rather than the
hosts feeling that they have to say what they think the American partners
want to hear.

Thrive is a two-year program with two cohorts designed for
pastors who are just entering their careers and those who are midway
through their careers. The 2020 cohort is composed of a group of African
American pastors and a group of Ghanaian pastors. This paradigm offers
pastors of churches of all sizes the opportunity to involve their churches in
global partnerships at the grass-roots level. Church members become cross-
cultural workers as pastors engage their congregations for global missions.
When partnerships such as these exist, it does not take the resources of
megachurches to join in the call to fulfill the Great Commission on a global
level. Pastors of small- and medium-size churches who are participating
in programs such as Thrive can reach out to other small- and medium-size
churches in their communities to partner with and help those churches
get involved in global missions. Indeed, if African American churches join
forces in this way, the Black Church can become a powerful force in global
missions.

Conclusion

African Americans have experienced life in a way that is uniquely
different from every other people group in America. The Black Experience
has been characterized by racial prejudice, dehumanization, inequality,
exclusion, and violence. Yet African Americans have managed to survive
and even thrive in the midst of suffering. Fundamental to the success has
been the Black Church and its involvement in community engagement.

This paper has argued that the lived experiences of African
Americans and the central role of the Black Church in the African American
community together have done much to prepare African Americans for
participation in global partnerships. As stated by Leonidas Johnson, African

Americans have what it takes to take care of God's business. The time has come for us to become more involved in the work of global missions. The time has come for us to partner with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world as witnesses to the message of the Good News of the kingdom of God, a message of survival and liberation. To those who say we have enough work to do here at home, let us be reminded that the Great Commission is not an either/or proposition. We have not been excluded from the call to spread the message "to the ends of the earth." We have before us a wonderful opportunity to be God's "battle-axe." Let us not let this opportunity pass us by.

End Notes

[1] *Black* and *African American* will be used interchangeably.

[2] All Scripture references are from the New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[3] Other anti-Black race riots occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); East St. Louis (1917); The Red Summer of 1919 in which riots occurred in twenty-six cities; Detroit, Michigan (1943); Newark, New Jersey (1967).

[4] According to Raboteau, there were some slave masters who did allow the enslaved to attend church. There were independent Black churches and racially mixed churches prior to Emancipation. It was not uncommon for enslaved persons to outnumber White persons at a Sunday service.

[5] This story was relayed to me by a personal friend, the African American woman on the short-term mission team.

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