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Abstract African American megachurches are part of a larger trend in American Protestantism reflecting the ecclesial shifts that have taken place in America during the final quarter of the previous century. There are, however, historical and religious distinctions that differentiate African American congregations from this broader, largely evangelical phenomenon. The purpose of this article, then, is to introduce and analyze African American megachurches in such a way that they are historically situated, racially located, and ecclesiastically differentiated. This article addresses the precipitous rise of black megachurch congregations in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and ethically examines shared institutional and ideational values. And it argues that the professional identity, mass culture compatibility, and theological creativity that broadly define black megachurches represent creative fusions and internal tensions that pose ethical challenges to their congregational missions.

Keywords African American Megachurches · Great migration, suburbanization · Mass-appeal · Affluenza

One of the more popular occurrences within recent American Protestant history involves the congregational megachurch. Megachurches are typically identified as congregations with an average Sunday morning attendance of 2,000. Yet, such congregations tend to have both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Megachurches are full-service Christian campuses that create shopping-mall-like environments and foster comprehensive Christian lifestyles for the entire family. Private schools, childcare and after-school programs, fitness facilities, athletic leagues, restaurants, book stores, and community volunteer opportunities are just a few of the services megachurches provide. Due the grandness of

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membership size and breadth of ministerial scope, many have come to regard the megachurch model as the congregational ideal in regards to effective and efficient Christian ministry (Thumma 2008).

   African American megachurches are part of this larger Protestant phenomenon and reflect the ecclesial shifts that have taken place in America during the final quarter of the previous century. These changes include the decline of the denominational mainlines, the rise of conservative evangelicalism, and a growing post-denominational trend. Changes in societal and cultural patterns such as the American tendency toward suburbanization in the latter half of the twentieth century provide an additional explanation (Ellingson and ebrary Inc. 2007; Miller 1997; Travis and Dave 2007). Such contributing factors indeed cut across racial and ethnic lines. There are, however, historical and religious distinctions that differentiate African American congregations from this broader evangelical trend (Barnes 2009; Tucker-Worgs 2001/2002; Walton 2009). To view today's African American megachurches as solely representative of the changing contours of American Protestantism erases their longstanding history, minimizes their racialized trajectory, and obscures their diversity. Megachurches in the African American community are by-products of the peculiar relations between African Americans and the dominant society, a racialized hierarchy of black sociopolitical exclusion that necessitated this kind of hybrid spiritual and social institution. In this regard, sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes is correct insofar as "the emergence of megachurches in black communities builds upon an older but unrecognized feature of black church history (Gilkes 1998)."

   The aim of this article is to introduce and analyze African American megachurches in such a way that they are historically situated, racially located, and ecclesiastically differentiated. Dating back to the nineteenth century, black megachurches as religious epiphenomena are assessed in relation to the changing contours of racial stratification within particular historical contexts that are structured by other forms of dominance and political milieus.[1] But, particular attention will be paid to the precipitous rise of black megachurches in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The shared institutional and ideational values that broadly define contemporary African American megachurches (notwithstanding ecclesial diversity among them) are then evaluated from an ethical perspective by unmasking creative fusions and internal tensions associated with congregational attempts to garner mass-appeal in today's transit, cosmopolitan environ-

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[1] This approach is theoretically informed by Stuart Hall's use of historical specificity in regards to race and culture. For Hall, this involves analyzing the changing contours of race (and, for me, race-based institutions such as African American megacongregations) within societies structured by other forms of dominance and political realities. Hall's concern is twofold: First, he seeks to identify an adequate theory of racism that takes into account the economic and superstructural features of a given society without falling into the economic reductive traps of classical Marxist approaches. Second, by doing so, he seeks to steer away from viewing racism (and, for me, race-based institutions) as a general feature of human societies not dictated and determined, in part, by economic relations and political realities. Therefore, Hall's call for historical specificity rejects a general theory of racism in some transhistorical or universal manner. Just the same, it prevents us from viewing black churches as ahistorical and racially and theologically bound to a "pure" tradition, rather than beginning with an assumption of racial and ecclesial difference (specificity) in relation to a given historical epoch (Hall 1996).

ments while remaining rooted in, and responding to, local communities and their particular concerns.[2]

Early Formations

Despite the prevalence of African American megachurches in the contemporary moment, it is wrong to view the megachurch model as *creatio ex nihilio* in recent decades. Large African American congregations can be identified during every epoch in the history of predominantly black churches dating back to the emergence of pseudo-independent African American congregations in late nineteenth century. Early black congregations, often referred to as "African" churches, were both religious and social reactions to unfortunate cultural realities. Institutionalized white supremacy, whether in the forms of chattel slavery, physical terror, or racial codes regulating the mobility of non-enslaved blacks, denied African Americans the right to full civic involvement, political access, and economic participation. Yet, African Americans, in varying ways, created visible and invisible arenas of relative ecclesial freedom and spiritual autonomy to buffer the soul murdering effects of America's apartheid systems.

Albert Raboteau's classic text *Slave Religion* notes that in some areas of the South the growth of large congregations that drew members from both the "town and country" antedated the Civil War (Raboteau 1978). For instance, in the late eighteenth century, a white plantation owner, Jonathan Bryan, sanctioned a gathering of enslaved blacks in a rice barn on his property. Andrew Bryan, an African American exhorter deemed by law the property of Jonathan Bryan, led the group of worshippers who would travel from surrounding plantations. The fellowship grew despite worshipping under the weight of white terror and violent racial reprisal. As necessary within the context of slaveholding Deep South, any collective gathering of blacks required the sanction of local white authorities. Andrew Bryan's reputation as a "faithful" and "devout" exhorter impelled sympathetic whites to appeal to a state judge on the congregation's behalf. The judge deemed their fellowship legal as long as they only worshipped on Sunday between sunlight and sunset.[3] Moreover,

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[2] The "unmasking" dimension is essential to the ethical process insofar as one seeks to hold communities of faith both responsible and accountable for their ecclesial activities. Following H. Richard Niebuhr, an ethic of responsibility neither proceeds from the questions, "What shall I do?" nor "What is right?" Rather the fitting action, which for Niebuhr is "alone conducive to the good and alone is right," proceeds from the question, "What is going on?" This is why this paper seeks to identify, compare, and analyze African megachurches, within their specific historical contexts, in order to rightly interpret the meanings of their activities, and, in the words of Niebuhr, "so that they come to us not as brute actions, but as understood and as having meaning" (Niebuhr 1999). *The responsible self: an essay in Christian moral philosophy.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

[3] My use of the terms "faithful" and "devout" here seek to capture the polysemic nature of both within the context of a white supremacist, slaveholding, Christian community. Here, they are used to describe not only the ways sympathetic whites perceived Andrew Bryan's faith commitments in relation to the sacred, but how they interpreted his fidelity and devotion to the system of white supremacy in Savannah. In other words, according to their logic, a truly faithful and devout black Christian translates into a faithful and devout enslaved body. Now of course, this is neither true for the enslaved nor the enslaver. Prohibitions against independent black worship would not be necessary if it were. Yet, this is part of the lie and racial game that created the ideological conditions to allow for such oxymoronic identities as "good slave," and, more importantly, "benevolent slaveholder."

Jonathan Bryan's respect in the community as a prosperous planter certainly curtailed the violent intentions of some local whites who would otherwise wish Andrew Bryan and the fellowship harm. Following Jonathan Bryan's death, his son, William Bryan, allowed Andrew to purchase his freedom and brokered a deal with another white property owner for the recently freed Bryan to purchase a plot of property (Billingsley 1999). Here, in 1790, the congregation built the first church building owned by blacks in the city, Bryan Street African Baptist Church (later named First African Baptist Church). By the time of his death in 1812, when Andrew Bryan's nephew Andrew Marshall took over as pastor, the membership at First African Baptist Church of Savannah numbered 2,417 (Raboteau 1978).

There was also the First African Church of Richmond, Virginia, organized in 1841 as an offshoot of the multiracial First Baptist Church. Since African American attendance reportedly outnumbered that of whites four to one, when First Baptist completed its new edifice, white members encouraged the establishment of First African for the enslaved community (Taylor 1926). First African appointed Rev. Robert Ryland, a white minister, as their inaugural pastor. As was the case in Savannah, white supervision came with the implicit intent to maintain a system of slave control as well as prohibit the free assembly of African Americans as set forth in Virginia's slave codes. Under the leadership of Ryland, First African's membership totaled 2,056 in 1843 and 3,260 in 1860 (Raboteau 1978). As the Civil War came to a close, the congregation was taken over by another white minister, Rev. George Stockwell. Black worshippers, however, expressed a greater desire for congregational independence and black pastors in the pulpit. By 1867, the congregation appointed a formerly enslaved deacon, James Henry Holmes, as the church's first black pastor.[4]

Rev. Holmes connected the congregation to the life of black Richmond (Taylor 1926). No longer relegated to sunlight on Sunday, in the post-emancipation era, First African became the bedrock of black public life. The church building, which had a seating capacity of nearly 4,000, was more than a place of Sunday worship. The church hosted African American high school and normal school graduations; it served as the meeting place for various civic organizations, and even became the primary site of political gatherings. This image of the African American congregation as a social institution that confronts the social ills of poverty, illiteracy, and the legalized restrictions placed upon black humanity is well documented (Billingsley 1999). Many institutional black churches in the nineteenth century, particularly those organized in non-slaveholding areas such as Philadelphia and Boston, formed mutual aid and moral reform societies and worked toward increased educational opportunities. But, congregational and community activities of congregations like First African cannot be reduced to programs and services directed toward racial uplift and thus social integration. Elsa Barkeley Brown described First African Church in this way: "The church provided more than a physical space, financial resources and a

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[4] See the recorded history of First African Baptist Church on the church's current Website: http://www. firstafricanbaptist.org/aboutus.htm

communication network: it also provided a cultural base that validated emotion and experience as ways of knowing, and drew on a collective call and response, encouraging the active participation of all (Brown 2003)." First African became a central social institution from which African Americans in the Reconstruction era created a black public sphere over and against the social mores and injustices of the dominant white society.

Brown's historiography is consistent with historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's description of black churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in general and Jane Dailey's analysis of Reconstruction-era Virginia in particular. Higginbotham refers to black churches as interstitial counter-publics, a description that borrows conceptually yet simultaneously critiques Jurgen Habermas's formulation of the public sphere as that which mediates between private citizens and the state. Higginbotham rejects Habermas's seemingly bourgeois viewpoint while further noting that historically situated and institutionalized discursive arenas within societies stratified by race, class, and gender are comprised of numerous "publics" that are in contestation and thus "counter" to one another. Black churches, in this view, became counter-publics standing in opposition to the dominant white public (even as it embraced values representative of the dominant white public). This reveals, as Higginbotham is clear to distinguish, a conceptual distinction between popular concepts of civil or public religion and black churches as public spheres.[5]

Supporting this read of First African as an interstitial counter-public, historian Jane Dailey argues that it is analytically impossible to isolate social institutions like First African from the political machinations taking place in postwar Virginia. Legalized white supremacy in the form of Jim Crow was a protracted struggle in the final three decades of the nineteenth century. And her analysis of the multiracial, political coalition known as the Readjusters corroborates Elsa Barkley Brown's assertions that First African served as a critical site of political, social, and gendered contestations as blacks attempted both to lay claim to civil rights and political opportunities in the dominant society via *interracial cooperation*, while securing economic stability and acquiring social respectability for black Richmonders via *intraracial cultivation* (Dailey 2000). Public lectures by politicians and community activists, the creation of militias for community self-defense and even the holding of the Republican state convention in 1867 at First African as Virginia sought restoration to the Union serve as historical evidence to these claims. As an early megachurch, then, First African Baptist of Richmond fits E. Franklin Frazier's institutional model of "imperium in imperio," a "nation within a nation (Frazier 1974)."

This is not to suggest that large congregations like First African in Savannah and Richmond were common in the antebellum and post-emancipation eras. In the nineteenth century, over 90% of African Americans resided in rural areas in the South, which limited the mobility and resources required to maintain large

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[5] Civil religion is concerned with the religious dimensions of the public realm such as singing the Star Spangled Banner, while a conception of black churches as a public sphere emphasizes the public character of African American congregations (Higginbotham 1993).

congregations.[6] This would soon change.[7] Beginning in the first few decades of the twentieth century, an estimated seven million African Americans migrated from the South to the North and from rural to urban areas in the southern regions during multiple phases broadly referred to as the Great Migration. Multiple factors spurred the mass exodus from the rural South which traditional "push/pull" or "social" versus "sentimental" accounts obscure. Indeed, a depressed rural economy in the South and a growing industrial labor market in the North along with select southern urban centers like Birmingham, New Orleans, and Atlanta impelled relocation. And a culture of terror and legalized white supremacy caused many to hop the train northward bound (Gregory 2005; Goodwin 1990; Grossman 1991; Baldwin 2007). But, there were also religious animating impulses insofar as many blacks interpreted the North and the act of migration through biblical lenses and with religious imaginations. Religious historians Milton Sernett and Wallace Best note the soteriological themes pervasive in the correspondence of migrants and how entire congregations relocated to the Great Lake States and Middle Atlantic region (Sernett 1997; Best 2005). As migrants confronted and attempted to negotiate a new urban landscape that was a far cry from an archetypal image flowing with milk and honey, many black migrants looked to religious institutions as their *axis mundi*.

The mass influx of migrants led to exponential membership growth among previously established churches. African American congregational life in New York City provides an instructive example. By 1930, there were at least seven churches in the city whose membership totals exceeded 2,500.[8] In almost every case, this growth was characterized by great celerity. Between 1914 and 1920 alone, the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Harlem grew from 300 to 3,500 (Sernett 1997). Metropolitan blended its spiritual mission with social concerns. The congregation ran a grocery, hardware store, and operated properties in Harlem to provide affordable housing for

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[6] In the Mississippi Delta, for example, historian John Giggie notes that despite the presence of several church-based mutual aid societies with the intent of offering assistance to the ill as well as death benefits in the 1870s and 1880s, most were short-lived. They may have been modeled after black institutional churches in the Northeast, but the fragile financial condition of these organizations translated into minimal life spans (Giggie 2008).

[7] At the turn of the century, less than 740,000 African Americans lived outside of the South, a mere 8% of the total African American population of the United States. By 1970, 10.6 million, 47% of the total African American population, lived outside the South with a third of those being southern transplants and even more the children or grandchildren of southern migrants. The dramatic population shifts of the migration eras are important when giving an account of the development of densely populated African American communities in major cities that made large black congregations possible and arguably necessary. I am conscious of historian David Wills' concern that sociologically inflected before and after narratives hinged on the Great Migraton can create a problem for our understanding of the postreconstruction era and twentieth century. So, this is not a Robert-Park-inspired narrative of black folks trapped in a premodern *Gemeinschaft* waiting for the Great Migration to usher them toward a modern *Gesellschaft*. The important insights of Elsa Barkely Brown, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Jane Dailey, and John Giggie reveal the post-emancipation efforts of varying African American communities from the Deep to Midsouth (Gregory 2005; Wills 2009; Park 1974).

[8] The identified congregations include Bridge Street Baptist, Fleet Street AME Zion, Berean Baptist, and Holy Trinity Baptist, all located in Brooklyn. And Metropolitan Baptist and Abyssinian Baptist, both in Harlem. Its important to note also that a few other congregations such as Brooklyn's Concord Baptist and Bethany Baptist grew exponentially by the 1950s (Taylor 1994).

church members. Metropolitan's neighboring church, Abyssinian Baptist, undertook similar efforts. Abyssinian was already a megachurch at the outset of World War I. Located in midtown Manhattan, its pastor, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was aware that 70% of New York City's African American population lived uptown in Harlem. By reestablishing residence in Harlem in 1923, Abyssinian became one of the most vibrant and vital social institutions in black New York.[9] Though church membership was comprised of many "well-to-do Negroes," in reaching out to migrants with a comprehensive social ministry that included a community house for the homeless and soup kitchen for the hungry, the church sought to disrupt class lines and economic barriers. By the time Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a well-known community activist that was later elected to Congress, took over the congregation from his father in 1937, Abyssinian's membership exceeded 10,000.

The city of Chicago also boasted its share of large congregations. None was larger than the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, the oldest African American church in the city established in the nineteenth century that catered to the growing black community on the Southside. The Reverend E.J. Fisher pastored the congregation from 1903 to 1915 helping it to grow to almost 4,000 members. While this is remarkable by most standards, the membership almost doubled over the next 5 years under Reverend Fisher's successor, the Rev. Lacey Kirk Williams. The congregation sought to accommodate large crowds by holding three Sunday morning worship services, but relocation was inevitable. Mt. Olivet purchased a structure that formerly housed the oldest white Baptist congregation in the city. Its membership had been decimated due to fears about the "browning of Bronzeville." Within a few years, the Mt. Olivet membership roll swelled to 9,763. It was not alone. According to Robert Sutherland's University of Chicago doctoral dissertation analyzing black churches in 1930, "Pilgrim Baptist claims 7,500, Ebenezer 6,000 and Greater Bethel 6,000. Four other churches list themselves as having 3,000 members or more and still larger numbers fall within the two and one thousand groups (Sutherland 1930)."

In addition to the unprecedented growth of the established mainline congregations, the Great Migration impelled changes in African American religious life that transformed the institutional and ideational values of many black churches. The migrant community was not a religious tabla rasa. Migrants relocated with their own religious beliefs and creative cultural practices in tow. Unfortunately, the cultural gifts of black religious expressions from varying regions were not always appreciated. For instance, established congregations often viewed migrants through supercilious lenses. Institutional churches interpreted their roles positively as social caregivers, even as they sometimes patronizingly acted as behavioral custodians and cultural imperialists. During the early migration era, "down home" forms of worship such as extemporaneous singing, congregational shouting, or sermonic whooping were often frowned upon within institutional mainline churches and migrant behavior was arduously policed by draconian ecclesial codes (Best 2005).

Clarence Taylor's history of black churches in Brooklyn sets forth the many ways black congregations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted "high" cultural forms as a means of social uplift. Great attention was paid to architectural detail and the interior decoration of sanctuaries. Sermons

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[9] Ibid.

became increasingly scholarly and emotionally sober. And the signing of folksy music or Negro Spirituals as a participatory ritual was replaced with European classical hymns that were to be performed with the exactness of Beethoven, Bach, or Brahms (Taylor 1994). In describing this sort of religious practice in Chicago, historian Davarian Baldwin asserts that these congregations, "presented programs structured by heightened orderliness and bodily restraint to discipline souls and combat the perceived migrant worship practices linked to the southern slave past (Baldwin 2007)."

It is wrong to suggest, however, that all sizable, African American congregations of the era were of this previously established, institutional type. There were many "mega" Pentecostal, Spiritualist, and other nondenominational congregations that hardly conformed to, or could be confined by, the traditional storefront or "house church" image.[10] Consider Chicago's Pentecostal Church of All Nations. Organized in 1916 by Elder Lucy Smith, a southern Baptist who migrated to Chicago from Atlanta around 1910, All Nations Pentecostal, in many ways, represents her personal religious response to the triumvirate of racial, class, and gender oppression. The former Lucinda Madden testified to having felt alienated as a young woman at the Olivet and then Ebenezer Baptist churches. She left the Baptist faith altogether uniting with the predominantly white Pentecostal Stone Church, where she felt more comfortable using her whole body as an instrument of devotion and medium of the divine. Smith started her ministry outside of the gendered restrictions of the premier black Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ, organizing a tent revival on Langley Avenue on the city's south side. And after a few years of relocating from abandoned movie theaters to Masonic Hall Temples, All Nations Pentecostal became a powerful and prosperous interracial ministry. In 1933 she became the first black radio evangelist in the city of Chicago. And along with her vernacular style of preaching, it was All Nations' embrace of creative musical instrumentation commonly associated with Chicago's nightclub scene that became the church's real draw. The church boasted 5,000 attendees on Sunday morning and a 100-voice choir complete with organist, pianist, drummer, and guitarist. In fact, the All Nations Church and The Glorious Church of the Air radio show served as critical early platforms for the former blues singer Thomas Dorsey to showcase his blue note inflected hymns that we now refer to as gospel music. Church of All Nations, then, tapped in and contributed to an alternative yet growing black cultural marketplace in cities like Chicago, which allowed migrants to bypass established systems of hierarchy and secure cultural legitimacy. By so doing, Sanctified faith communities were able to expand the sources of spiritual and social recognition among the emerging working class that ultimately forced traditional faith communities to

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[10] In addition to expanding membership rolls of the established black mainline congregations, the Great Migration spurred an additional religious phenomenon, animated by and for Southern migrants. Persons began to join together in houses or untraditional rental spaces to form independent religious communities with such regularity that the phenomenon has come to be known as the black storefront movement. But, storefront congregations cannot be reduced to a particular religious affiliation or denomination. These churches included Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal-Holiness, as well as several other independent religious organizations that developed which traversed the religious landscape; i.e., black Muslims, Jews, Spiritualists, as well as Vodoo and Hodou groups. Thus, the term "storefront" does not constitute a substantive definition, as much as a physical characteristic.

broaden and even reestablish their own standards of legitimacy and respectability (Baldwin 2007). This was all part of the creation of what Wallace Best refers to as a new sacred order in Chicago based on a pragmatic religiosity that transformed the entire religious landscape of the city (Best 2005).

Similar religious changes account for the growth of large churches like the Church of Universal Triumph, Dominion of God in Detroit. Organized in 1938 by James F. Jones, a Spiritualist minister from Alabama, the church renovated a former movie theater allowing thousands to pack in up to five times a week to receive a prophesy from "His Holiness the Rt. Rev. Dr. James F. Jones, D.D., Universal Dominion Ruler, Internationally Known as Prophet Jones." Jones led healing services, offered prophesies concerning family and finances, and promoted other acts of divination to assuage the many socioeconomic ills associated with urban life. Social services like those performed at Olivet in Chicago or Abyssinian in New York were not a part of Church of Universal Triumph's ministry outreach. Rather Jones touted mind-science, positive confession, and his professed gift of revelation as the panacea for life's problems (Brean 1944). Appropriating the language of American New Thought metaphysics, Jones promoted divine knowledge and sacred insight over traditional Christian doctrine in order to deliver persons from what he considered the mental slavery of economic and religious bondage (Atlanta Daily World 1946). In fact, it was this idea of changing one's orientation toward the world that many church members credited with better employment, healthier relationships, and lifestyles in the urban context. This is not to suggest, however, that Prophet Jones and thaumaturgic diviners of his ilk were distinct creations of the urban environment. In many ways, his ministry was quite consistent with faith healing and conjuring practitioners found in black communities throughout the rural south. Hortense Powdermaker's early anthropological treatment of African Americans in 1930s Mississippi identifies, for instance, "Rev. D." who, according to Powdermaker, "in addition to curing illness, he gives advice and aid in any sort of predicament, instructing people how to act and giving them a charm to insure success (Powdermaker 1939)." And of the four "conjure doctors" she identifies, Powdermaker concludes that their financial prosperity, "supports their claims of a substantial following, and their bearing indicates that they feel themselves to be men of standing and power in the community."[11]

As a theological precursor to ministers now referred to as prosperity preachers, Prophet Jones was (in)famous for accepting lavish offerings and expensive gifts from church attendees and radio listeners. The Church of Universal Triumph members, who were also referred to as Ladies, Lords, or Princes and Princesses according to their individual gifts, pooled their resources to purchase a fleet of luxury cars and thousands of dollars in gold, diamonds, and other expensive jewels. Prophet Jones had a nationally syndicated radio show where callers contributed love offerings in exchange for having prayers answered by the evangelist. Jones owned a 54-room mansion modeled after a French castle, and its bedroom closets were filled with custom designed suits and other monarchial inspired outfits (Ebony 1950). A pair of sisters in Chicago sent Prophet Jones a white mink coat estimated to have cost $13,500. The schoolteachers claimed that Jones healed their mother. These sorts of lavish indulgences caused the *Saturday Evening Post* to dub Prophet Jones the "Messiah in Mink (Kobler 1955)."

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[11] Ibid.

There was also the Peoples Independent Church (PIC) of Los Angeles. Its origin dates back to 1915 when members of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church objected to the reappointment of their popular, community-minded pastor, the Reverend N.P. Greggs. Many felt the autocratic structure of the A.M.E. denomination countered democratic accountability and frustrated social responsibility. By 1940, as the growing war industry attracted blacks from the southwest, the PIC was the largest congregation in the city, boasting around 15,000 members (Levette 1953). Clayton D. Russell, the church's young pastor and radio revivalist, relied on his track record of political and social involvement, as well as his fancy cars, clothes, and celebrity charisma to attract the well-connected and those still reeling from the effects of the Depression.

For instance, the PIC enacted extensive social welfare networks. The church started a job training and shelter for young boys and paid an unemployment consultant who was available to all of black Los Angeles. And the church received national attention for its role in organizing the wartime Victory Committee of Los Angeles in particular and assisting the "Double V Campaign" across the country in general (Pittsburgh Courier 1942). Russell, along with other prominent black community leaders in town, formed an umbrella organization toward acquiring jobs for African Americans in the defense industry. As tens of thousands blacks relocated to the city, seeking work in the defense plants and shipyards, the Victory committee exploited the war in order to hold the federal government accountable in hiring able-bodied men and women regardless of race. Their moral mantra was clear; industries that discriminate against African Americans hurt the war effort by failing to maximize national resources. Accordingly, the committee encouraged active patriotism and support for the war among African Americans. Despite the jingoism inherent to this strategy, the Committee's aim was more pragmatic and self-serving. The Committee mapped on their efforts to the Double V campaign inaugurated by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest circulated African American newspaper of the day, with a bipartite foci, "victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefield abroad (Anderson 1980)." And to promote further job creation, the PIC opened up five "Victory market" grocery stores around the city of Los Angeles. It seemed that many of the congregation's business ventures were more symbolic than substantive, however. The Victory markets only lasted a couple of years. And Clayton Russell eventually resigned as pastor of the PIC due to charges of fiscal impropriety. One might argue that during the wartime era, such short-lived business ventures were instruments to solidify congregational status. Moreover, Russell's larger-than-life personality and ministerial bravado elicited competing responses among those who gravitated to his kinetic energy but repelled by a lack of financial discipline and organizational follow-through. In many ways, then, the PIC under the leadership of Russell's charismatic yet sometimes controversial pastor was emblematic of large ministries of the era that sought to juggle mass acclaim with community concern.

Contemporary Characteristics

Despite the existence of megachurches in African American communities throughout the previous century, one must still acknowledge the expansion of this ministry

model since the 1980s. Similar to the reasons black megachurches emerged during earlier migration eras, today's congregations grew quite rapidly in response to changing black life in America. Social and cultural shifts in the post-civil rights era impelled structural, regional, ecclesial, and theological changes among many African American Protestant congregations. The exclusion of African Americans from white organizations prior to the 1970s, whether de jour or de facto, necessitated the conditions of which black religious organizations were forced to fulfill multiple roles. As predicted by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and confirmed by contemporary sociologists of religion such as Darren Sherkat and Christopher Ellison, with the lessening of such racial restrictions, black churches are forced to compete with religious, political, and civic organizations of the dominant society from which blacks were previously restricted and/or that have developed in recent decades (Frazier and African-American Collection 1963; Ellison and Darren 1995; Sherkat 2002). The historic Ebenezer Baptist Church of downtown Atlanta must compete with both the predominantly white First Baptist Church across town and nondenominational ministries popping up along suburban beltways. Similarly, the Links or Mocha Moms, Inc. readily challenges the women's ministry of the former. But, black churches that have both survived and, more importantly, thrived numerically in recent decades are those that appear to accommodate and respond to the restructuring of black communities. Namely, the ability to make ministries, worship and sermons speak to the spiritual and material concerns of community members (Barnes 2001-2002; Barnes 2009). In recent decades, contemporary black megachurches can be broadly characterized by their professional identification, suburban affiliation, and Charismatic, neo-Pentecostal orientation.

First, the professional identification of today's megachurches is a result of the growth of the black middleclass since the civil rights era. Black professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and CPA's sit in the pews. Consequently, members demand a higher level of professionalism from the ministry and their ministers. Trustee boards are now often comprised of trained financial service professionals. Health care professionals organize blood drives and varying health screenings at the church. Educators and college students participate in church tutoring and mentoring programs, even as many congregations now operate their own schools. And the vast majority of megachurch pastors are seminary-trained with sizable number holding D.Min degrees.

Consider the Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, currently the largest United Methodist congregation in the nation. In 1982, the then fledgling congregation appointed Kirbyjon Caldwell, a 29-year-old Houston native, as senior pastor. Caldwell graduated from Carleton College with a BA in Economics and proceeded to earn his MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. It was after working as an investment banker in New York City and Houston that Caldwell enrolled in Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University to pursue a career in ministry. Yet, Caldwell's background in business and finance has had a profound effect on the Windsor Village Community. Within a decade, the congregation increased to nearly 5,000 and over 10,000 by the turn of the century.

Windsor Village professes in its church mission that "we believe God has called us into action to help establish (build) on earth the Kingdom He [sic] has already

ordained in Heaven for our personal lives and the life of our community. Salvation isn't just about the hereafter. God wants us to prosper holistically today and to help others go and do likewise."[12] Toward this end, the church assumed several community revitalization projects over the past two decades, most notably the creation of the Power Center. The Windsor Village community invested $600,000 in offerings from their church, acquired a government grant, and secured foundational support in order to renovate a 104,000 square foot dilapidated strip mall. Today, the former K-Mart shopping center houses various business enterprises including a Texas branch of Chase Bank, a community health clinic, and the fourth largest conference center in Houston. To meet the educational needs of the community, the Power Center offers the Imani School for Children and the Houston Community College Business Technology Center for adult job training in technical fields (Caldwell 2000). Moreover, Pastor Caldwell serves as spiritual advisor to Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, as well as sitting on the board of several major companies including Continental Airlines (Miller 2008).

The suburban affiliation of the contemporary phenomenon reflects the larger African American outward push from the central cities, which transpired in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Federal funding devolution at the hands of Reagan era policies and deindustrialization had a deleterious impact on America's urban areas. Related, though not reducible to, these socioeconomic realities are the reversal of African American migration patterns in recent years to the South. Sociologist William H. Frey's findings reveal that the South recorded net gains of black migrants from the Northeast, Midwest, and West regions. Consistent with the previous stated professional character of megachurches, college-educated blacks led the migration to states like Maryland, Texas, and Georgia between 1995 and 2000 (Frey 2004). In contrast, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco suffered net losses of African Americans. This helps to explain the prevalence of megachurches in southern metropolitan areas like Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas/Ft. Worth. Moreover, accessibility and affordability factor into the frenetic growth of megachurches in the suburbs. In contrast to the central cities, suburban communities provide easier access to major highways, and affordable, larger plots of land necessary to accommodate large worship centers, auxiliary buildings, and acres of parking (Travis and Dave 2007).

The focus on accessibility also speaks to a shifting ecclesial concern. A growing number of today's African American megachurches seek to transcend particular geographic locales and traverse the boundaries of neighborhoods and even regions. For instance, African American megachurches often pull members from across metropolitan areas with some even establishing satellite congregations—"one church in two locations" has become a common description of the latter model. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman describes this type of congregation as a niche church, a congregation that "successfully garners enough resources from a larger institutional environment to be able to offer a distinctive array of services with little competitive overlap (Ammerman 1999)." Niche congregations are not as interested in serving a specific locale as they are securing a marketable identity independent of context.

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[12] See "Who We Are" on Windsor Village's website at: http://www.kingdombuilders.com/templates/cuskingdombuilders/details.asp?id=23260&PID=68419

Wherever congregants are relatively mobile and cosmopolitan, as is often the case among the professional classes in major metropolises, the niche model becomes a more likely and viable option. Often this leads to expansionist and marketing approaches toward ministry. Product placement and demographic research become central operational components of outreach. Television commercials and billboard advertisements are common. New media technologies such as live streaming Web services, You Tube, and social networking sites become branding tools. And the most successful national and international ministries secure valuable television broadcasting time and book publishing deals with major imprints (Walton 2009).

The World Changers Church International (WCCI), located right outside of Atlanta, typifies Ammerman's niche model. Organized in 1986 by Creflo and Taffi Dollar inside of an elementary school cafeteria, the 20,000 plus-member congregation(s) is part of a larger postwar neo-Charismatic movement known as Word of Faith, commonly referred to as the prosperity gospel. The Dollars have become two of the more recognizable proponents of this particular form of theology that blends scriptural adherence, positive confession, and an emphasis on economic advancement. Their daily national television broadcast, international conference tour schedule, and score of self-help publications attract a national following. By 2005, WCCI began organizing satellite churches across the country. It began with Creflo Dollar riding in his private-owned leer jet up to Manhattan each week to hold a Saturday evening service inside the Madison Square Garden auditorium, WCC-NY. Since then, WCCI headquarters in Atlanta has opened the following nine satellite locations: WCC-Brooklyn and WCC-Queens (NY); WCC-Carrollton, WCC-Marietta, WCC-Norcross (GA); WCC-Dallas, WCC-Houston (TX); and WCC-Los Angeles (CA). According to WCCI's Website, "Members enjoy LIVE streaming services directly from its home church, World Changers Church International." And in addition to each satellite church maintaining its own ministry team locally, Pastors Creflo and Taffi Dollar also make scheduled preaching appearances at any one of the nine other church locations.[13]

WCCI's liturgical and theological orientation leads to the final characteristic of the contemporary megachurch phenomenon, a charismatic, neo-Pentecostal orientation. To be clear, some have used the appellation "Charismatic" to describe traditional mainline denominations that embraced spiritual gifts such as miracles, healing, and speaking in tongues. Similarly, neo-Pentecostal was originally interpreted as a conceptual bridge between the ecstatic worship of Pentecostals and the social activism of black mainline denominations (Lincoln and Lawrence 1990). But, for my purposes here, both charismatic and neo-Pentecostal describe a renewed emphasis on the experiential and affective encounters with the spirit, an expressive and energetic worship, and realized demonstrations of the divine.

I use the term renewed purposefully. Much has been made of the worship style of today's megachurches in the recent literature. Some have suggested that the emotionally charged and joyful nature of worship reflects Protestantism's turn toward individualism and the therapeutic, as congregations seek to cultivate a "seeker-friendly" environment (Sargeant 2000). And sociologist Stephen Ellingson even analyzed how praise and worship music have reshaped the theological emphasis of mainline worship. In his view, "such songs present an inoffensive, simplistic faith in which the reality of evil,

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[13] See http://www.creflodollarministries.org/SatelliteChurches/Marietta.html

suffering, and the costs of discipleship are not articulated (Ellingson and Ebrary Inc. 2007)." Historically, black congregations across the ecclesial spectrum resist these sorts of characterizations and critiques. Jubilant and unpretentious singing and preaching has always been a constitutive, even if contested, dimension of African American Protestantism. The participatory elements of repetitive, rhythmic singing and accessible, antiphonal preaching represent traditional African faith practices, as well as the democratic inclinations of eighteenth century revivalism that led many enslaved African Americans to "come to Jesus." This is true even among the institutional congregations discussed previously that eschewed such demonstrative styles of worship. The arrival of southern migrants literally pushed the praising hands of otherwise "orderly" and "scholarly" preachers to embrace a more engaging style during the interwar era (Best 2005). And it would belie the history of the African American Protestantism in America for anyone to accuse these faith communities of ignoring "the reality of evil, suffering and the costs of discipleship," as Ellingson does when describing white mainline megachurches (Ellingson and Ebrary Inc. 2007). Even spiritualist congregations like Prophet Jones and Rev. Ike with their health and wealth mysticism were responding, though in their own particular way, to the vacillations and vicissitudes of black urban life. And so, even though Windsor Village United Methodist Church and the World Changers Church offer contrasting theological interpretations and ecclesial responses to human pain, poverty, and suffering, they are indeed articulated.

This renewed emphasis on gifts of the spirit has in many ways reconfigured and blurred ecclesiastical hierarchies and denominational boundaries. Many megachurch ministries feel more comfortable affiliating with other religious bodies in which they believe there to be a greater spiritual affinity and theological vision. For instance, in the early 1990s, Rev. Paul Morton, the pastor of Greater St. Stephen's Missionary Baptist Church in New Orleans, organized the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (FGBCF) in order to bring together other African American megachurch pastors who were Baptist yet Pentecostal-informed, which many were referring to as "Bapticostal." In contrast to traditional black Baptist denominations, the FGBCF recognized the free expression of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (including glossolalia), affirmed women in ordained ministry, and established an Episcopal hierarchy establishing tiers of leadership, i.e., bishops, overseers, senior pastors, and elders. In recent decades, several other loosely affiliated fellowships have developed among African American Baptists insofar as the title "bishop" is becoming more commonplace in Baptist circles.

Bishop Eddie Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, GA, an original organizing bishop of the FGBCF now presides over "The Fathers House," which New Birth's website describes as a "pastoral alliance that serves as a fellowship and outreach to senior pastors globally."[14] Bishop Walter Scott Thomas, pastor of New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, is the "presiding prelate" of the Kingdom Association of Covenant Pastors.[15] And then, there are some pastors, like Bishop John M. Borders III, pastor of the Morning Star Baptist Church in Boston, who have adopted the title as a spiritual designation without jurisdiction over a particular district or fellowship (Wangsness 2010). The title bishop, for some, has become something to achieve, rather than an ecclesial function to serve. But, in a growing post-

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[14] http://www.fhouse.org/fathershouse.aspx
[15] http://www.kingdomassociation.org/

denominational context where communities of faith are increasingly cross-pollinating traditions, values, and religious practices, this sort of ecclesial bricolage will become increasingly the norm.

With this sort of ecclesial ingenuity comes theological creativity in regards to realized manifestations of the sacred. To be sure, emphasis on the immanence of God is nothing new. James Weldon Johnson's famous lyrics, "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who has helped us thus far on the way," beautifully captures the sense of dependency many have on a God who knows, cares, hears, and shares. Just as anthropomorphic tropes depicting Jesus as a burden bearer, doctor in a sickroom, and lawyer in the courtroom, have become sermonic staples within both mainline and more Sanctified traditions alike. Yet, in recent decades, many megachurch pastors have pushed the theological envelope insofar as the magico-religious and Spiritualist teachings that focus on healing, love, material increase, and money have become more acceptable. Theological teachings that were once considered by scholars to be along the storefront margins—though maybe erroneously—are now a part of the megachurch mainstream (Fauset 1944; Mays et al. 1933; Washington 1984).

Consider the health and wealth theology of the Word of Faith movement. The ministries of Creflo and Taffi Dollar have already been noted, but the World Changers Church International is far from alone. There is the Word of Faith Christian Center in Southfield, Michigan, Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral in Atlanta, and St. Louis Christian Center of Missouri, and New Light Christian Center in Houston, just to name a few. A large number are part of the Fellowship of Inner-City Word of Faith Ministries (FICWFM), another voluntary fellowship for Faith ministries headquartered at Fred Price's Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles. As Milmon Harrison writes in his groundbreaking treatment of the movement, "The membership of the FICWFM is distributed throughout 35 states in America and 3 foreign countries, with a membership of approximately 300 pastors or ministers, representing a combined congregational membership of approximately 150,000 believers in the churches over which these pastors or ministers preside (Harrison 2005)." Here, the themes of increase, abundance, and overflow are theologically sanctioned as pursuits of expensive clothes, cars, and cash are consecrated at the altars of consumption. Since God represents abundance and provision, according to this theology, many believe that if they "know who they are in Christ" and positively confess it with their tongues—also referred to as "name it and claim it"—God will provide divine health and material wealth regardless of one's race, class, gender, level of education, or family background.[16] For African American working and middle classes that have scratched and scraped in search of their slice of the American pie, a divinely democratic theology, which confers control back to the individual believer, seems to have a particularly powerful resonance.

Similar theological themes are prevalent outside of Word of Faith circles. The same sense of unbridled optimism and material expansion that characterized the first decade of the millennium was proclaimed from pulpits across the country. "Taking Authority" and "Called to Conquer" bookend the ministry of Bishop

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[16] Ibid.

Long at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. "Give Us This Mountain," a reference to Old Testament characters Caleb and Joshua's laying claim on Promised Land territory, was the animating theme and rallying cry for the Victory Baptist Church's new sanctuary and family life center building project in Stone Mountain, GA. And "Building Champions" is the motto of Faithful Central Bible Church in Los Angeles, a church that purchased the former home of the Los Angeles Lakers for 22 million dollars in 2000. These sorts of dominant theological themes that structure many black megachurches reinforce, and even reify, expansionist orientations. It is no wonder, then, that Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through the Blessed Life* topped the New York Times bestseller list in 2000, and Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Gold Medallion Book of the Year award in both 2001 and 2002. Based on I Chronicles 4:10 that reads, "Jabez called on God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain.' So God granted him what he requested." As megachurches mushroom and scores of congregations embark on new building efforts, texts like Wilkinson's serve as a theological foundation for building fund efforts.

To be clear, my point in illumining theological creativity as a shared characteristic of contemporary black megachurches is to neither obscure nor flatten the ecclesial diversity of these ministries. To the contrary, my descriptions of particular congregations attempt to show why African American megachurches should not be considered monolithic. There are congregations like the Word of Faith International Church in Southfield, Michigan, known for its active racial effacement and conservative political stances, while there are also churches like St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, Union Temple Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago that promote black-nationalist thought and politically progressive activity. The ministries' racial and political views are indeed based on particular conceptions of God.[17] But, for my purposes here, I prefer to show how the contemporary megachurch movement renders traditional categorizations of black Protestant life inadequate. The Greater St. Stephens Baptist Church in New Orleans, for instance, disrupts traditional categories of black mainline or "mainstream denominations," the antiquated language of "sects," as well as the interpretive theological work that both of these heuristic shorthands perform—the former being committed "to a reformist strategy of social activism," and the latter emphasizing personal conversion.[18] Rather, the more successful megachurches pragmatically appeal to multiple theological orientations and ecclesial traditions while also resisting strong identification with any one in particular.

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[17] Elsewhere, I systematically trace and chart what I consider to be the dominant theological orientations that structure the phenomenon of black religious broadcasting. Since local megachurches serve as studios for leading black evangelical religious broadcasters, I am confident that the categories of neo-Pentecostalism, black Charismatic mainline, and neo-Charismatic Word of Faith work as descriptive, though far from exhaustive, ideal-types to make sense out of the crowded terrain of contemporary megachurches (Walton 2009).

[18] For examples of this sort of categorization, see: (Baer and Singer 2002; Sherkat 2002).

Ethical Concerns

Megachurches have their fair share of critics and ethical concerns. Some criticisms involve the inherent institutional tensions of maintaining very large ministries and have been consistently raised by critics of consecutive generations. Other ethical concerns are particular to the historical and cultural contexts that informed the most recent super-sized megachurch bubble.

For instance, what is the relationship between size and service? Here, I am inquiring about the grandness of congregational size in relationship to the breadth of ministry scope. It does not require extended research on megachurch Websites or a great amount of time inside their walls before one hears a plethora of professions touting the church's social service record. This is particularly true during offering time. "Thanks to your gifts and financial contributions, we are able to meet the needs of and even transform this community," is a popular refrain. Yet, for congregations that are tithe-dependent, and, more often than not, mortgage strapped, a disproportionate amount of the church's budget—and thus ministerial focus—is fettered by the building and associated costs.

This is not a new dilemma. After Richmond's First African completed their new building in the late nineteenth century, the church's new building policies changed the nature of black community politics. "Having completed, at considerable expense, their new edifice," Elsa Barkley Brown writes, "First African worried about avoiding damage and excess wear and tear (Brown 2003)." Though First African's sanctuary was the largest facility open to African Americans in Richmond, and previously a site of regular community events, the church started to prohibit political meetings, community lectures, and graduations. Barkley goes on to contend that, rather than being a place that brought the community together, "First African contributed to the increasing segmentation of black Richmond."[19] In 1907, Richard R. Wright, Jr., made a similar observation. In an article entitled, "Social Work and Influence of the Negro Church," Wright suggested that with the growing migrant community, congregations were missing the opportunity for social service provision. "They do an immense amount of unsystematized charity and social work," Wright opines, "but it is largely done to secure money to pay Church debts and not for the social uplift (Richard 1907)." And 1 year into the Great Depression, Nannie Burroughs provoked the ire of many black male preachers by referring to Christian pastors to groundhog leaders, "those who tuck away comfortably all winter and peep out in February to see if winter is over." According to Burroughs, black churches were "impotent in the present economic crisis and industrial depression (Burroughs 1930)."

Similar criticisms might be made of today's megachurches. Toward the end of Scott Thumma and Dave Travis's *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, published just prior to the near global economic meltdown, the authors offer a warning about economic downturn. Noting "many megachurches carry megadebt on their facilities," the authors predicted that an economic collapse would lead to the reduction of staff and unfavorable renegotiations of debt (Travis and Dave 2007). The authors could not have been more accurate in their analysis. The 2007 Great Recession illumined the economic fragility that was just below the gilded surface. A growing number of

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[19] Ibid.

churches today are on the economic skids. Reasons vary yet include diminishing offerings due to increased unemployment among congregants coupled with increased needs in the community. But, I want to suggest that the very kinds of financial overreach and aggressive growth that came to define the larger American culture, in general, and megachurches, in particular, are raining down on black churches. Many black Protestant congregations suffer from the affects of *Affluenza*.

Affluenza is a satirical term used to describe a serious American reality, "the socially transmitted condition of overload, debt anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more (Wann et al. 2001)." Previous generations have called this "Keeping up with the Joneses" in reference to individuals and/or families who extend beyond their own financial means in pursuit of the perceived social status of others. It would not be a conceptual stretch to suggest that the contemporary megachurch phenomenon is both reflective and constitutive of this larger trend in hyper-consumption wherein "bigger is better." According to the US Census, construction spending on houses of worship (not including auxiliary buildings) increased from 4.5 billion in 1997 to 7.5 billion in 2007.[20] Unfortunately, as is the case with many individual households, frenetic growth and the pursuit of more have proven seductive yet debilitating (Smith 2010;Hals 2010; Sataline 2008).

Today, there are growing lists of churches that are, or are on the verge of, foreclosing. Some are high profile yet trying to remain anonymous as they seek to balance inspirational fundraising efforts with anxious appeals to lenders in order to renegotiate loan terms (Barnette 2010). And others show little shame about their situations in attempts to illumine what they consider to be the nefarious lending practices of the mortgage industry (Scurlock 2010). Critics point to companies like California-based Evangelical Christian Credit Union and Strongtower Financial, contending that these Christian mortgage companies followed commercial lenders by securitizing church loans and engaging in other high-risk practices (Zoll 2009). According to Thomas Reuters Westlaw legal database, to give one example, reported foreclosures among religious use facilities increased in the state of Georgia from three in 2007 to 40 in 2008 and then 52 in 2009. The seeming cozy relationship between Christianity and corporatism witnessed over the past few decades—as several megachurch pastors refer to themselves as "CEO's" and congregations as "international corporations"—reveals that lack of economic sobriety leads to severe financial hangovers even for God's financial managers.

It may be that some megachurches have preached themselves into an institutional conundrum. What happens to megachurches when grim economic realities belie optimistic and expansionist theologies? If buildup and growth was grounded in "taking authority," "creating champions," or "enlarging my territory," when harsh financial times come, megachurch leaders must negotiate where exactly to lay blame. There seem to be three options: (a) suggest God has failed, (b) imply the people have failed in terms of their faith, or (c) concede that maybe God was not as interested in our "taking the city for Christ" as we once believed. The third option seems to be the most principled and theologically sound. But, once church leaders step out on the perch of lofty building projects and high-priced purchases, retracting God's command is easier said than done (Verrier 2010).

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[20] http://www.census.gov/const/www/privpage.html

A final concern involves the prevailing male gender hierarchy among African American megachurches. Consistent with a vast majority of historically black churches, black megachurches are disproportionately populated by women yet almost exclusively pastored by men. It is true that megachurches are more open to and affirming of women in ministry than many of the traditional denominations such as the National Baptist Convention and Church of God in Christ. And there is a growing trend of co-ed co-pastoring. In nearly every case, however, the co-pastor is the spouse of the male who first occupied the position of pastor. Some might regard this as an effective way to offset the masculinist evangelical structure of feeling that pervades the megachurch sphere. Witnessing a woman in leadership bearing the title pastor is a radical conceptual shift for a disproportionate number of African American Protestants. But, one can also interpret this trend less generously through cynical frames. As a result of both the entrepreneurial model of many megachurches and the strident sexism evidenced in most evangelical theology, the spousal co-pastor model may be little more than a manipulative rouse. Rather than a model of shared governance across gender lines, it may be similar to a nepotistic business model of "keeping it in the family." And, in the worst cases, spousal ministerial teams signify the theological ordering of the sexes as the female co-pastor models appropriate female submission to male authority—conservative gender theology with a modern twist for today's working woman, if you will.

Nevertheless, singular female pastoral leadership remains relatively nonexistent within black megachurches. Of the 20 predominantly African American megachurches in the state of Maryland, only one was solo pastored by a woman, Betty Peebles at the Jericho City of Praise in Landover who passed away in late 2010. Barbara King of the Hillside Chapel Truth Center in Atlanta and Cynthia Hale at the Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur are the only solo women pastors out of nearly 30 black megachurches in metropolitan Atlanta. And, there are no solo women megachurch pastors in either the Dallas/Fort Worth or Houston areas.[21] Similarly, though the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship was founded, in part, to promote the role of women in ministry (soon after its founding, Bishop Paul Morton elevated his wife Debra Morton to Elder, and she currently serves as Pastor of one of the two churches the couple now lead, St. Stephens Full Gospel Baptist Church in New Orleans and Changing a Generation Full Gospel Baptist Church in Atlanta), the Fellowship is predominantly male-led. No women occupy any of the 11 Executive Council positions or the eight seats on the Bishop's Council. And among the 26 auxiliary council seats and 35 regional/state bishops, only one woman currently serves a post.[22] These numbers reveal that even within the contemporary foci of megachurches that seek to stay attuned to societal shifts and professional decorum, women are still trapped on sticky hardwood floors and cannot pierce opaque stained-glass ceilings.

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[21] Numbers here are based on an analysis of the "Database of Megachurches in the U.S." compiled by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and my own research on African-American megachurches. http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html In regards to the paucity of female solo preachers, I welcome any correction. Unfortunately, even if another African American woman megachurch pastor is identified in any of these areas, she will still be the exception that proves the gender-biased norm.

[22] The current leadership structure and office holders of the FGBCF can be accessed here: http://fullgospelbaptist.org/html/tiers.html

Concluding Questions

The purpose of this article was to reveal that large African American congregations antedate the Civil War and became a staple of black Protestant life during the interwar era. These hybrid institutions have always served multiple spiritual and social roles, serving as organizational and esthetic archetypes for the contemporary phenomenon. This article sought to reveal that congregations have indeed shifted their ecclesial foci and institutional and ideational values with the changing socioeconomic and religious patterns of black life. But, questions and concerns will continue to arise concerning their roles in the community. Will African American megachurches have the institutional capacity to be "all things to all people" despite their most valiant efforts? Will the theological creativity and marketing strategies necessary to garner mass-appeal in today's transit, cosmopolitan environments further impede institutional efforts (and economic capacity) to address local concerns? And can these largely autonomous and entrepreneurial congregations be self-critical, economically sober, and gender progressive enough to broaden beyond insular communities and ideological commitments that prohibit them from being as economically "empowered" and gender equal as they profess to be?

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