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Integrated-Integrating Pedagogy:
A Practical Theological analysis of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents

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Abstract

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By Almeda M. Wright

The purpose of this dissertation is to clarify the definition of fragmented spirituality and to present a three part practical theological analysis of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents. Fragmented spirituality occurs when a person's deeply held religious beliefs are separated from other critical issues or areas of their life; such as a belief in a personally transformative and protective God and experiences of racism where one never names God as working or calling one to work to end racism.

This dissertation attends to the on-the-ground realities of African American youth and African American churches through semi-structured interviews and surveys with a sample of African American Christian adolescents. The data outline their understandings of their spirituality and its connections to their identity and communal engagement. This section also explores the formal teachings of African American churches through an analysis of *Urban Ministries, Inc.* curriculum and sermons from a national sample of African American churches.

In the second section, this dissertation explores a larger conversation about the connection of religion to American public life. It explores the ways that fragmentation in African American adolescent spirituality can be a "symptom" of trends in the broader American context towards individualism and separation of religion and civic engagement. This conversation highlights the psychological, sociological and theological dimensions of fragmentation. In this section, I also name alternatives to the problematic effects of fragmentation: These alternatives emerge from the historical and theological legacy of African American churches, Womanist Spirituality, and Black Liberation theologies.

In the third and final section, I continue the exploration of alternatives to fragmented spirituality and offer pedagogical strategies for fostering an *integrated-integrating spirituality*—spirituality that empowers youth to hold together the seemingly disparate arenas of their lives, to tap into the resources of their faith communities and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, in order to see themselves as capable of affecting change on individual, communal, and societal levels. These strategies include tapping into the spiritual disciplines and worship practices of African American churches and pushing youth to embrace critical reflection and transformative action as essential religious practices.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Is God Big Enough?”

Can we expect God to be, change, and work everywhere and everything?

“Is God Big Enough?” was my initial question when I encountered the stories of Christian African American adolescents who on a regular basis experience racism, poverty, violence and other affronts to their humanity and fail to name the possibility of God working to address these injustices. I was perplexed that Christian youth (and many adults) simultaneously profess faith in God and fail to describe God as empowering them to end or even work against the cycles of systemic oppressions around them. I wondered whether their concept of God was big enough or inclusive enough for them to trust that God would or could do something to change their current reality.

However, upon further reflection, the major issue is more complex than simply whether African American Adolescents’ concept of God is big enough, but it pushes us to ask why their conception of God is “fragmented.” Religious educator Evelyn Parker points to a “fragmented or fractured spirituality” among African American youth and gives examples of African American youth who boldly proclaim God’s ability to change their lives and to empower them towards personal success; however, the same youth are silent about God working in the realm of communal oppressions and injustices. In other words, God is very “big” in certain areas of their lives, but God appears limited or non-existent in other areas. God, for these youth, is a very personal reality; while societal ills and systemic problems, such as racism are in the realm of the “non religious” (or public

and political arenas). Likewise, such problems are viewed as falling in the realm of “utopia” –as things that one can wish for but never expect to happen.¹

The concept of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents also points to and is reflective of trends within our larger society. In particular, fragmented spirituality connects with post modern conceptions of the self, in which one coherent consistent unifying self is no longer seen as the norm; instead multiple selves and narratives are understood to constitute a person’s identity. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the causes of multiple selves or narratives in post modern identity, it is important to explore this theoretical framework; for in discussing fragmentation and multiplicity of human identity, we are better able to conceive how African American youth can espouse seemingly disparate spiritual beliefs and practices.² Similarly, fragmented spirituality connects with many trends in modernity to separate our lives and society into public and private realms – and in many ways to develop divergent expectations for what takes place in each realm. In particular, exploring sociological trends, which view religion as personal and private, helps us understand how some youth

¹ I first encountered the term fragmented spirituality and the general content of the definition in Evelyn Parker’s *Trouble Don’t Last Always*. (Pilgrim, 2003), 35-36. Parker specifically defines the problem of fragmented spirituality in terms of African American adolescents discourse about their faith and racism. I build on her initial findings to also explore the disconnection of adolescent spirituality from discourse around other systemic ills– looking at the intersectionality of systemic ills such as racism, classism/poverty, sexism, youth violence, etc.

² See Kenneth Gergen, *Saturated Self*. (1991). Gergen is somewhat apocalyptic about the demise of the coherent/traditional self, but points toward a concept of a relational self, that does not simply see humans as chameleons (being whatever is required in a particular setting), but sees the self as emerging in relationships with others.

See also Dan P. McAdams, et al. *Identity and Story*: (2006) The authors in this volume also point to the contradictions sometimes inherent in post-modern/multiple selfhood, but they also begin to point to how these contradictions are neither completely “bad” nor the entirety of the identity story – in many ways these multiple and contradictory identities function better than a rigidly coherent identity and serve to expand particular categories. For example, this volume contains an essay on the identity of Homosexual Orthodox Jews, for many this is a contradiction in terms, but the authors point to how they’ve come to construct/narrate their identities to include both.

lack the expectation that their religious convictions or practices should concern or affect anyone beyond themselves.

Therefore, while I find it problematic that African American youth do not conceive of God or their Christian spirituality as responding to the larger, systemic ills that they experience and name in their daily lives, I understand that there is something “highly functional” about fragmented spirituality. Fragmented spirituality helps youth function in a post-modern society. For example, African American Christian youth, characterized as having a fragmented spirituality are often the ones that are most involved in their church or school communities and have positive outlooks on their personal success, based on their personal relationship with Jesus. Many of these youth passionately respond that they can do “all things through Christ who strengthens them” and honestly do not find it contradictory to exclude working toward social and systemic change in the list of “all things.”³ In other words, African American youth with fragmented spiritualities are not necessarily *at risk*; however, the African American community and church are at risk if we continue to help youth participate in the mythology that the personal and the communal are separate or that a personal relationship with Jesus is separate from the call of Christ to work for communal and systemic justice.⁴

³ Philippians 4:13 (paraphrased). Also see Evelyn Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 29-51 for a fuller discussion of her interviews with youth actively involved in churches, but still not finding the resources within their Christian communities to redress systemic ills.

⁴ My assertion that youth experiencing a fragmented or fractured spirituality are not *at risk* is not to downplay the seriousness with which I see and attend to this phenomena. I do, however recognize that most youth exhibiting a fragmented spirituality are highly functioning in our current society; yet the question should be do we only want youth to function (and in a corrupt society) or do we want them to live fully into their God-given vocations. For example, religious educator and practical theologian David White writes “While youth seem outwardly comfortable with such distortions of human life, they risk never finding authentic selfhood or Christian vocation described by Jesus as love of God, neighbor, and self.” See David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 53.

Therefore, the issue is not simply expanding the mind sets of African American adolescents – but begs the questions of how do we ensure that Christian theology and African American religious education and ministry with youth are relevant to the particular needs of youth (both the personal and systemic) and offers youth tools for integrating the seemingly disparate arenas of life. Towards this end, the purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First I attempt to further explore and clarify the experience and components of fragmented spirituality among African American youth. Second, I explore alternatives to fragmentation and propose pedagogy which fosters a more integrated spirituality. I begin this exploration of fragmented spirituality among African American youth asking the questions of

- ⌘ How and why are African American Christian adolescents experiencing fragmentation in their spirituality? In what ways are youth not connecting their belief in God with a call to work for change or even a hope that change in their communities can take place? and
- ⌘ What can we do to foster an *integrated-integrating* spirituality? What type of theological claims and pedagogical frameworks are necessary to help adolescents develop a more integrated spirituality? What spiritual practices or disciplines empower youth to attend to the myriad dimensions of youth life and societal concerns?

I approach these questions by offering a practical theological analysis of fragmented spirituality among African American youth. I explore my definitions and rationale for a practical theological methodology and analysis below.

Earlier Research on Fragmented Spirituality among African American Youth

In this research, my preliminary conversation partner and the theorist responsible for the language of “fragmented and integrated spirituality” is religious educator Evelyn

Parker. Her work, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents* begins to fill a void in religious scholarship in that very little has been produced specifically giving voice to the spirituality and spiritual concerns of African American adolescents. Parker also offers the only explicit treatment of fragmented or fractured spirituality among African American adolescents I have encountered. Therefore I quote her work at length in outlining my preliminary definition and understanding of this phenomenon.

Parker encountered fragmented spirituality in looking at the interview data of African American youth in the 1990s in the Chicago area. Her interviews gave examples of youth who passionately described their understandings of God and how they saw God working in their lives, but when she moved to conversations of their experiences of racism the youth switched to language of “wishful thinking.” In discussions of racism they did not exhibit the same confidence or even see God working in their lives regarding racism. Parker notes that “Deeply held religious beliefs and issues of race and violence are bifurcated...these teenagers express little or no expectations regarding racial injustice and no beliefs of God’s activity in ending racism.”⁵ She further writes:

Surprisingly, the teens most active in worship, Sunday School, and youth groups, and most articulate about their Christian beliefs and practices were the ones who poignantly talked about racism never ending...Absent from their conversations was the expectation that God can transform racist people and oppressive institutions of domination. Their agency to dismantle racism was also absent. Even though theological themes of God’s protective presence and God’s power to transform and save permeated the life stories of the youth active in their congregations, none of them talked about racism in light of their deeply held theological beliefs. None of the youth gave testimony about God’s presence when affronted by racial profiling or racist insults, nor did they talk about God’s power to transform racism.⁶

⁵ Parker, 43.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

Parker's work is somewhat startling because she is not simply articulating the occurrence of disillusionment or hopelessness in youth without a core faith or faith community; instead her research points to the disconnection between beliefs about God and expectations of change in the world among some of the "most faithful" youth. Parker, however, does not view the youth as lacking the requisite skills to work for and expect change—she notes that they have the "rudimentary ingredients," but have not yet pulled them together.

[For two youth Parker interviewed] Racism also is disjointed from their Christian beliefs in God who has the power to transform, convert, save, and protect. These youth failed to reveal how God acts regarding racism...The theological themes of God who has power to transform, convert, save, and protect are the rudimentary ingredients of *expectancy* and *agency*, but [the youth she interviewed] do not use them in this way.
...⁷

As an alternative to fragmented spirituality, Parker offers the idea of an integrated spirituality based on her core theme of emancipatory hope. For Parker, emancipatory hope is "to expect transformation of hegemonic relations of race, class, and gender and to act as God's agent ushering in God's vision of human equality."⁸ Parker further asserts the connection between integrated spirituality and emancipatory hope, writing:

Ministry intended to bring about emancipatory hope fosters an integrated spirituality that weaves together both pious and political ideological meanings. Religious belief and social practice are interrelated; they are intertwined. ... Conversely, a fragmented Christian spirituality prohibits the weaving of language, belief and practice.⁹

Therefore, appreciating Parker's groundbreaking work in looking at questions of racism and fragmented spirituality, my dissertation research entails interviewing and

⁷ Ibid, 37, emphasis added.

⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁹ Ibid, 35-36.

observing African American youth to get a better understanding of the other “fragments” of their spirituality; to better understand why and how youth are experiencing fragmented spirituality; and to explore strategies for working towards a more integrated spirituality. In other words, African American youth are not only experiencing a disconnection between their understandings of God and their experiences of racism, but I explore issues across many dimensions of adolescent life and a wide array of systemic ills. I look at what spiritual practices, theology, and pedagogy are able to attend to and integrate youth understandings of God, humanity, community, society and themselves as individuals, as African Americans, as Christians, and in relationships and community.¹⁰

My research calls for an integration of each of these seemingly disparate areas, without the prioritizing of one over the others. My experience growing up in a church that espoused individual salvation and a personal relationship with Christ reminds me of the value and sustaining dimensions of those beliefs. I also know that, at times, my current efforts of affect change are thwarted when I do not have a spiritual grounding and personal disciplines (such as prayer, scripture reading, meditation, and communal sharing about God’s goodness) to sustain the “work of justice.” In other words, my hope is not simply that all African American youth will embrace a social justice oriented

¹⁰Embedded in this web of understanding are the complex questions of youth around issues such as:

- *Race identity development among Black youth*-- Should one exhibit pride in one’s racial or ethnic heritage? Should one embrace elements of black culture such as hip hop, Africentrism, particular hair and fashion styles?
- *Christian Identity*-- What does it mean to be a good Christian? Does it include a personal relationship with the Divine? Attending church? Personal acts of piety (sexual purity, not drinking, cursing, etc.? a call to serve others and to give of one’s self?
- *Personal success* -- what does it mean? Accumulation of personal wealth? Personal career goals? And how does one balance that with other concerns
- *Social Concern* -- Should one work for communal uplift and systemic justice? And what does that look like and how can it be balanced with academic goals or desires to earn a living?

Christianity, but that African American youth will be empowered both by a “personal relationship with Christ” *and* compelled by this relationship to see and respond to systemic and communal injustices.

For example, each of the above named dimensions, of personal piety, spiritual disciplines, faith in a powerful God, pride in one’s self and ancestors, and working for social justice, is part of the complex legacy and history of the African American church. Many sociologists of religion and ethicists point to these trends in their attempts to characterize the Black Church.¹¹ For example, Lincoln and Mamiya in their seminal text noted the insufficiency of attempting to characterize the Black church and Black spirituality by one characteristic alone. Instead, they offered a dialectical model of the black church that holds “polar opposites” in a dialectical tension. They in turn describe sets of concepts held in a dialectical tension, such as priestly and private functions, other-worldly versus this-worldly, universalism and particularism, communal versus privativistic, charismatic versus bureaucratic, and resistance versus accommodation.¹²

Building on (and offering a critique of) the work of Lincoln and Mamiya, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that even a dialectical model, holding pairs of discrete concepts, does not fully capture the complexity of the experiences of the Black church(es) and spirituality. Instead, Higginbotham outlines a dialogical model of the Black church and spirituality. Thus, I explore Higginbotham’s dialogical model of Black churches and spirituality and explore the diverse elements of African American

¹¹ Du Bois pointed to the communal and social roles and functions of the Black church, while at the same lambasting the church/pastors for not helping to improve the personal piety/morality of Blacks in American. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. (New York, First Vintage Books, Library of America ed., 1990 [1903])

See also Frazier, E. Franklin, *The Negro Church in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

¹² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 12-15.

religion and spirituality, which help youth to hold together their understandings of the personal, the communal, the religious and the secular; and to see themselves as active agents in each of these areas.

Integrated-Integrating Spirituality

The ‘spirituality’ of a people... [is] the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences. Metaphorically, the spirituality of a people is synonymous with the soul of a people: the integrating center of power and meaning...

--- Peter J. Paris¹³

Spirituality ... arises from a creative and dynamic synthesis of faith and life, forged in the crucible of the desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively, and fully.

--- Alister E. McGrath¹⁴

Building on earlier research on the spiritual lives of African American youth and on several definitions of Christian spirituality, I assert that fragmented spirituality is problematic and that youth should and can work to embrace an integrated-integrating spirituality. I define *integrated-integrating spirituality* as spirituality that empowers youth to hold together the seemingly disparate arenas of their lives, to tap into the resources of their faith communities and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, in order to see themselves as capable of affecting change on individual, communal, and societal/systemic levels.

¹³ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The search for common moral discourse*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 22

¹⁴ For my general understandings of Christian spirituality I refer to Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction*. (Blackwell Publishers, 1999). Other quotes are from educational and web resources, including: [www.stjohnadulthood.org/spir_1.htm#Defining Spirituality](http://www.stjohnadulthood.org/spir_1.htm#Defining%20Spirituality) (accessed 2/16/10)

In general Christian spirituality runs counter intuitive to experiences of fragmentation. Looking at several descriptions of Christian spirituality, scholars define spirituality as inclusive of the “whole person”, for example William Stringfellow writes:

... spiritual maturity or spiritual fulfillment necessarily involves the *whole* person – body, mind and soul, place, relationships – in connection with the whole of creation throughout the era of time. ...spirituality encompasses the whole person in the totality of existence in the world, not some fragment or scrap or incident of a person.¹⁵

Stringfellow, though arguably not explicitly considering the lives of African American youth in his research, is helpful in reminding us that Christian spirituality should speak to and include the whole person, which includes our experiences of race (and racism), gender (and sexism), emotions, bodily needs and expressions – all within a social and relational context.¹⁶ Similarly, other scholars speak to the ways that experiences of God should include elements of transformation, such that experiences with God should not leave youth feeling disempowered or limited in how they can act in the world. Catholic scholar Richard McBrien describes this aspect of spirituality, writing: “Spirituality has to do with our experiencing of God and with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as outcomes of that experience.”¹⁷ Further, Peter Paris, looking specifically at African and African American spirituality affirms that “African spirituality is never disembodied spirituality but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life...the goal of that movement is the struggle for survival... [And] it is the union of

¹⁵ William Stringfellow, *Politics of Spirituality*, reprint (Wipf and Stock, 2006), 22

¹⁶ Similarly, George Ganss S. J., in "Introduction" to *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Other Writings*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 61 writes that “Spirituality is a lived experience, the effort to apply relevant elements in the deposit of Christian faith to the guidance of men and women towards their spiritual growth, the progressive development of their persons which flowers into a proportionately increased insight and joy.” Ganss, like Stringfellow points to the ways that Christian faith should and can apply to every aspect of live and should affect on development.

¹⁷ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, (New York: Harper One, 1994), 1058

those forces of life that have the power either to threaten and destroy life...or to preserve and enhance it...”¹⁸

In defining an *integrated-integrating* spirituality, I also draw upon the work of revolutionary educator Paulo Freire, who defines integration in relationship to the work coming to critical consciousness:

Integration with one’s context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality.¹⁹

Each of these descriptions of integration and spirituality illumines the ways that Christian spirituality, under the best of circumstances, does not call for or include fragmentation of the person or of their lives. Instead spirituality is often defined in terms of its integrative role or power. Likewise, the need for integration and integrated spirituality parallels the needs for youth to be able to deal with their lived realities and feel empowered to be agents of transformation in their lives.

I am also intentional to call for an *integrated-integrating* spirituality because I understand spiritual formation and living out one’s spirituality to be ongoing. Given the nature of post-modern sensibilities, the ever evolving nature of the world, and the ever expanding arenas to which youth will be exposed, I see the need for a spirituality that is open to and inherently built on making sense of change. Essentially, my understanding of an integrated-integrating spirituality and pedagogy is one that empowers African American adolescents to make sense of and utilize the myriad resources they already have and to be open to including the experiences that will come as they continue to live. I also hold to the idea of an integrated-integrating spirituality because I understand the

¹⁸Peter Paris, 22

¹⁹Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Continuum Books, 1974), 5

difficulty of holding on to or living out a spirituality that holds so many tensions together. It would be much easier, in response to the pressures of social saturation and post modern deconstruction of master narratives, to cling more rigidly to only one narrative or one dimension of our spirituality and lived experiences. Therefore, I see the need to offer a pedagogy that keeps “cycling through” and offering supports for the ongoing process of integration.

In the following chapter, I give an overview of practical theological methodology as an approach to the question of fragmentation among African American Adolescents. I explore how a practical theological methodology which foregrounds my passions for improved religious practices is imperative for this project. In utilizing a practical theological methodology I situate myself and the discipline of religious education in the field of practical theology that seeks not only to describe “techniques” but to discern how God is calling God’s people to move and act in the world. The remainder of the dissertation follows the structure of my practical theological methodology and is outlined below.

Chapter Two

Practical Theological Interpretation and Methodology

Bridging the Chasm

The term “practical theology” strikes the ear as an oxymoron. The chasms that stretch between the discipline of theology and our ordinary lives of faith exist because theology does not frequently appear very practical...Indeed, while theologians go to extraordinary lengths to reconceptualize and articulate the life of faith, the actual struggle to find theology practical wrestles with the meaning of life and the daily experiences of living...Practical Theology attempts to bridge these chasms.²⁰

Even though the term *practical theology* has lost some of its oxymoronic character in many academic circles since Dale Andrews published his *Practical Theology for Black Churches*,²¹ his assessment of the chasm between the academic discipline of theology and the lived realities of faith communities, particularly African Americans communities, still rings true. The actual work of bridging the chasm between the theological academy and the lived realities of faith communities persists. Furthermore, the goal of bridging this chasm emphasizes the responsibility and work of practical theologians to attend to and take seriously the “ordinary lives of faith”; and to do so in such a way that is responsive to the ongoing struggles and questions of communities. In other words, as a practical theologian all of my research comes back to questions of how

²⁰ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1

²¹ Here I am careful to note that discussions of practical theology or even the “nomenclature” of practical theology are still widely absent in the lived communities and daily parlance of some participants in communities of faith. Anecdotally, I recently participated in a conversation regarding changing the name of a degree concentration from Christian Vocations or Christian Education to Practical Theology. Alongside the ongoing debates about what it meant to get rid of the word “Christian” in the concentration, there was a discussion of “really, how do we sell practical theology to people? Will they even know what it is?” This conversation, which took place in the 2009-2010 academic year points to the ways that people both within academia and in local congregations are attempting to navigate and fully understand the re-emergence of the language of “practical theology”, even before learning to fully grasp the discipline, methodologies or content of practical theologies.

will my research improve practices in the lived realities of this community—I do not participate in practical theological reflection as a disinterested “objective” researcher. My study of practices, communities and systems is in an effort to work for explicit and direct change within those communities. Thus, for me, Practical Theology is also ethical and transformative theology, which seeks to address issues of liberation, justice and transformation within society and religious communities.

In further reflecting on Andrew’s quote, above, I assert that the task of bridging the chasm remains daunting. This is a result of the often parallel, but rarely intersecting, conversations and practices that are taking place within the academy and communities of faith. It is also a result of the fact that attending to the “messiness” of lived communities often eludes easy analysis and the work of thinking constructively with communities can be consuming. In particular when thinking about what it means to take seriously or pay attention to religious communities and the “daily experiences of living,” the scope of what practical theological analysis entails can vary widely and can often require multiple processes.

Thus, in this chapter I outline the practical theological tasks I conduct in this dissertation. I do not attempt to rehearse the historical evolution of the field of practical theology; instead I review significant movements in practical theology in connection with my analysis of the lives of African American youth and religious communities.²²

²² For a succinct, but informative analysis of the history of practical theology and its connection with youth ministry see Andrew Root, “Practical Theology: What is it and how does it work?” *Journal of Youth Ministry*. Vol. 7 Number 2, Spring 2009, (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 2009), 55-72.

Contemporary Practical Theology: Tasks and Movements

Practical theology is theological reflection and construction arising out of and giving guidance to a community of faith in the praxis of its mission. Practical theology is critical and constructive reflection leading to ongoing modification and development of the ways the church shapes its life to be in partnership with God's work in the world.

---James Fowler²³

Reflecting on the contributions of James Fowler to the field of practical theology, and lifting up Fowler's corpus of work as paradigmatic of what practical theology can be, Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer outline contemporary practical theology as including descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks.²⁴ Each of these tasks correlates with a guiding question that one asks of a particular ministry context or praxis. For example the *descriptive-empirical task* attempts to answer the question of "*what is going on?*" and thus "focuses on the actual, empirical state of some form of religious praxis in a particular social context."²⁵ In this task, practical theologians attempt to offer an accurate and complete description of a particular religious experience. Here practical theologians often draw upon the empirical research of social scientists or conduct their own research, utilizing social scientific methodologies.²⁶ Closely related, the *interpretive task* places the empirical data into a larger context or "comprehensive explanatory framework" and asks the question: "*Why is this going on?*"²⁷ In the

²³James Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 17.

²⁴Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich L. Schweitzer, eds. *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 1-5.

While acknowledging the contributions to the field of practical theology, from historical theologians, such as Schleiermacher, to more contemporary theorists who were instrumental inspiring renewed energy around practical theology, such as Don Browning, in my dissertation I most heavily rely on the practical theological work of James Fowler, Richard Osmer and Mary Elizabeth Moore.

See also Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. (Eerdmans, 2007), 4-5. for Osmer's book length discussion of the four tasks of practical theology in communities of faith.

²⁵ Osmer and Schweitzer, eds., 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

interpretive task, practical theologians offer explanations and attempt to point to patterns or themes.²⁸ The *normative task* “focuses on the construction of theological and ethical norms by which to critically assess, guide, and reform some dimensions of contemporary religious praxis.” In the normative task practical theologians answer the question: “*What forms ought religious praxis take in this particular social context?*”²⁹ This task has the dual responsibility of assessing the particular ministry context and “mining” the community and religious tradition to see what resources exist to respond to the experience and context. It is important to note that the normative task of practical theology is always contextual, in that it is attempting to respond to a specific context. Finally, the *pragmatic task* takes seriously the question of “*How might this area of praxis be shaped to embody more fully the normative commitments of a religious tradition in this particular context of experience?*”³⁰ More succinctly the pragmatic task wrestles with “how” we will implement our norms. Arguably this task requires both discernment and creativity in proposing effective strategies in specific contexts. However, Osmer and Schweitzer again remind us that the pragmatic task is not always the culmination of the other tasks; instead they assert that “religious praxis when carried out in a reflective fashion is epistemic...it yields knowledge and insights that cannot be gained through empirical research, comprehensive interpretation, or normative reflection alone.”³¹

²⁸ Ibid, 3. The authors point out that it is not always necessary or efficacious to see the empirical and interpretive tasks as sequential, in that one’s interpretive frames can often alter/affect one’s descriptions and thus they emphasize the interactions in these two tasks (as well as the other four).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 4.

³¹ Ibid.

While Osmer and Schweitzer define each task as distinctive and distinguishable, the tasks are “mutually influential.”³² Hence it is important to clarify that 1) the tasks are not explicitly methodologies (I will discuss my particular research methods and tools below) and 2) the tasks are “not pursued in isolation from one another.”³³ Instead Osmer and Schweitzer write:

What is distinctive about practical theology as a field is the way all four tasks are pursued in a mutually influential fashion. Pragmatic concerns guide empirical research; interpretations of contemporary life are influenced by both theological norms and empirical investigation, which, in turn, are shaped by interpretation; and so forth.³⁴

Osmer and Schweitzer further assert that the “attention to all four of these tasks allow practical theologians to construct *action-guiding theories of contemporary religious practice.*”³⁵ Thus, it is Fowler’s ability to hold together each of the four tasks that makes his work paradigmatic. At the same time, it is the pressure to attend to each of the four tasks that makes the work of practical theology daunting (as noted above).

The more recent work of Richard Osmer is also of particular significance to my understanding of practical theology and practical theological interpretation and analysis. In this work, Osmer describes how in the midst of “doing ministry” and living in the communities of faith, there often arise moments that require deeper intentional reflection – some of which arise as moments of crisis and others simply as moments in which one desires to assess the ongoing practices of the community. In these moments he offers the four tasks and questions as a guide to interpreting and responding in ministry.³⁶ As noted

³² Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich L. Schweitzer, eds. *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. (Eerdmans, 2007), 4-5. In this text he also summarizes the four essential tasks of practical theology (drawing up and critiquing earlier

above, I too approach practical theological reflection from within both the academy and in communities of faith—thus it is often in these communities that crisis or questions arise. In particular, my concern for youth and their spiritual development emerged in a Sunday school classroom and was only cultivated and explored more fully in my academic theological reflection.³⁷

However, while I am indebted to the paradigm of James Fowler, and appreciative of Osmer's outline of the four common task of practical theology, in my dissertation I most closely build upon the practical theological framework of Mary Elizabeth Moore. In particular I draw on her working definition of practical theology in her recent volume on the spirituality of children and youth. While Moore offers fuller understandings of practical theology, the working definition resonated with my understanding and practice of practical theology. Moore describes practical theology as:

*...the study of God and the world by engaged reflection on action (past or present practice) and reflection for the sake of action (future practice). Practical theology, thus, originates in the world of practice, moves into engaged reflection and construction, and returns to praxis as the goal.*³⁸

In this working definition, Moore names two tasks, which encompass the four tasks outlined by Osmer and Schweitzer; however she also alludes to three movements of

articulations of practical theology) and offers four more succinct guiding questions: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?

³⁷ In this way, Osmer reminds us of the interrelatedness of practical theological reflection within the academy and communities of faith. Osmer, along with many other scholars including Fowler and Schreiter and Dean, among others push us to intentionally consider the ways that we do practical theology with communities of faith, both formally and informally. See: James Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 17.

Kenda Creasy Dean, et al. *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19-21. and

Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing" pp. 23-39 in Nancy T. Ammerman, et al. *Studying Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). Each commend the task of practical theological reflection as one that should take place in a community of practice, and not simply or primarily in academia.

³⁸ Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Children and Youth Choosing Life" in Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright, eds. *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 13.

practical theology.³⁹ Thus my understanding of practical theology combines Moore's three movements and Osmer's four tasks. For example, the movements provide a type of organizational structure and push me to honor the primary role that religious practice and communities of practices play in my work. Thus the questions which emerge in these contexts guide and come into conversation with theory, in a critical mutually reflective manner; and eventually press for a constructive response.

A Practical Theological Approach to Fragmented Spirituality among African American Youth

Utilizing the framework of Osmer and Moore, I have structured a practical theological approach to fragmented spirituality among African American youth which includes: (1) attending closely to the lived realities of African American adolescents and their spirituality; (2) engaging in constructive critical reflection on this reality by placing the experiences of African American youth in conversation with theorists of adolescent spirituality and religious education, post modern identity development, sociology of religion, and African American religion and history; and (3) touching back down in the world of practice by offering proposals for improved practice with African American adolescents. In line with the multilayered analysis inherent to practical theological methods, my methodology is complex and multidimensional.

Attending to the Lives of African American Adolescents

In order to understand fragmented spirituality in African American adolescents, I began by documenting and analyzing their articulations of core beliefs about God,

³⁹ These three movements also reflect, if not directly build upon the work of Don Browning, particularly his understanding of "practice-theory-practice".

humanity, community, society, and themselves (as individuals, African Americans, and relational beings). Additionally, I analyzed the educational curriculum that African American adolescents are taught in churches.

In my effort to attend closely to the spirituality and spiritual formation of African American youth, I started with and gave priority to the voices and understanding of African American adolescents. I interviewed eight African American Christian youth and conducted online surveys with another fourteen youth. The interviews and surveys gave me the opportunity to listen carefully to the youth and to offer some accounts of how African American youth are thinking about and experiencing fragmented spirituality. While a sample of this size is not large enough to predict trends for the entire population of African American Christian adolescents – these interviews give “texture” to theories about adolescent spirituality and serve as the starting point for further empirical research, theorization, and exploration of the spiritual formation of African American adolescents.⁴⁰

I also analyzed current educational curriculum in African American churches, including sermons from national and local ministries and Sunday school materials from *Urban Ministry, Inc.* I describe my process of selecting and analyzing these materials in greater detail in chapter four.

⁴⁰ See Appendix A for a summary of the field research protocol and the main objectives of the interviews.

It is also important to note that many scholars are now coming to see the pedagogical nature of interviewing youth (beyond simply gathering research data). For example see Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2007), 73-74. The authors note that conducting interviews with youth can be a type of “holy listening” and youth ministry in which youth come to make meaning through narrative. Therefore I remained open to the information I gleaned in the interviews as well as the pedagogical function of the interviews in fostering integrated-integrating spirituality.

Critically and Constructively Reflecting on African American Adolescent Spirituality

The second movement of practical theology calls us to reflect critically and constructively on the primary texts of adolescent lives and curriculum in African American churches—in order to ascertain patterns in what the youth are saying individually and in order to read the text of the youth interviews in light of other theories. More specifically in this movement it is imperative to reflect on the youth interviews through theoretical lenses that illumine or better define the experiences of fragmentation *and* in conversation with theorists or figures that offer alternatives to fragmented spirituality. In this section I briefly outline the theorists and areas of scholarship that (1) explore the larger societal context in which fragmented spirituality emerges and (2) explore alternatives to fragmented spirituality among African American youth.

Context of Fragmented Spirituality

While testing for “causality” in relationship to fragmented or fractured spirituality among African American adolescents presents enormous challenges and complexities, I found it equally illuminating to explore the trends within larger society that potentially affect and parallel experiences of fragmentation among African American adolescents. In this section I reiterate that fragmented spirituality is not simply, or even primarily, affecting African American youth. Instead, I argue that the larger society is also experiencing fragmentation. In particular, I explore the psychological and psycho-social dimensions of fragmentation, from Du Bois’ discussion of “double consciousness” and the corresponding religious temperaments to post modern experiences of plural and saturated selves.

Similarly, I also explore the larger socio-political and religious context in which African American youth experience fragmented spirituality. Here I explore theories of the privatization of religion, as manifest in the differentiation of roles and consciousness of particular institutions in society, along with Robert Bellah's reflections on religious individualism. These trends in American society and religion point to types of fragmentation. Finally, in this section I explore African Adolescent spirituality in the context of the religious lives of American youth in general; I explore Christian Smith's theory of *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* as the prevalent religious worldview of American youth.⁴¹

Alternatives to Fragmented Spirituality

In addition to theorists who help clarify and define the context of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents, possible alternatives to fragmented spirituality must also be considered. For example, inherent in naming the "problem" is the assumption that there are different, less problematic, more holistic forms of spirituality. In this section, I explore the legacy of the Black Church and African American spirituality. I argue that there is a need for youth to reconnect with the liberative and integrating elements of this tradition. In this section I also pay attention to the nascent theologies of youth and offer theological norms that expand upon their nascent theologies and foster theological understandings that are more holistic.

⁴¹ Smith with Denton, 162-164. See their work for a more complete discussion of their theory about moralistic therapeutic deism as popular religion among American adolescents.

***Proposing Improved Practice with African American Adolescents:
Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Integrated-Integrating Spirituality***

In the process of critically reflecting on the lives of African American youth and their experiences of fragmented spirituality, we are also called to take a constructive step of proposing practices that can offer an alternative to a fragmented or fractured spirituality. Therefore in this movement, I outline a critical pedagogy of integrated-integrating spirituality. As named above, my hope is not that all youth will have a spirituality that centers on only one strand or goal. This is not necessarily desirable or even achievable in post-modernity. Neither is my goal for African American adolescents to simply add another voice or expectation to their already fragmented realities. However, I assert that a fractured spirituality – one that does not allow for the many dimensions of a young person’s life to inform one another and interact in such a way that youth feel empowered to work for change on all levels—is insufficient.

The third movement of my practical theological analysis and methodology includes offering alternative practices—practices that respond to their experiences of fragmentation and point towards an integrated-integrating spirituality. Initially, the idea of developing an integrated-integrating spirituality seemed extremely daunting, but it is this step that serves as the core of my practical theological methodology and what separates my understanding of practical theology from other approaches to adolescent development and spirituality. In other words, it is not sufficient for me to simply analyze the system and problem without also envisioning what change can look like and how we can move toward change.

Practical Theology and Youth

Building upon each of these theoretical frameworks of practical theology, I also want to make an explicit claim about the connection between ministry with youth and practical theology. In many ways historical disciplinary boundaries have not only created an enormous chasm between “theological science” and practical theology (which at times throughout history has been narrowly defined as application of other theological disciplines); but these boundaries have also relegated much of the research on children and youth to a position of insignificance within the theological academy. Bonnie Miller McLemore frames her call for better engagement with religion and children and youth in the public square, arguing that

Children and religion have not fared well in the public realm in either modernity or postmodernity. In modernity, both were banished. Modern intellectuals pronounced the subject of children “at once too dangerous and too safe, too difficult and too silly,” in art historian Anne Higonnet’s words, “good only for second-rate minds and perhaps for women.”⁴²

Others also refer to the relative devaluing of children and youth within communities of faith, as well as in the academic and political spheres. However, as a practical theologian focusing on the spirituality of adolescents and the practices of communities of faith with youth, it is important to note the significant need to also bridge the chasms between the religious academy, communities of faith, and youth.

Specifically, in this dissertation I am mindful of the need to attend to the growing chasm between Black churches and African American youth. Historian, Albert G. Miller, in a lecture at the Princeton Theological Seminary Youth Ministry Institute argues that

⁴² Bonnie Miller-McLemore. “Children and Religion in the Public Square: “Too Dangerous and Too Safe, Too Difficult and Too Silly” in Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, eds. *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 31.

Here Miller-McLemore is quoting Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 13-14.

“Rather than fissures or small cracks, a more accurate description is the biblical metaphor ‘breach’. The chasm between Black youth and the Black church is as wide as the Grand Canyon ...”⁴³ Miller observes the “scarcity of youth” in the Black church, recounting the difficulty Black pastors name in recruiting and keeping teenagers and young adults.⁴⁴ He goes beyond describing this gap, however, and argues that the Black church is “irrelevant” to the concerns of Black youth.⁴⁵

In response to many of the claims about the irrelevance of churches and the disconnections between the religious academy and youth, several scholars have begun the work of affirming the ways that youth ministry is practical theology and are pushing practitioners (youth minister, youth workers, etc.) to participate in the process of ongoing practical theological reflection. In particular, Kenda Creasy Dean in her edited volume, *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*⁴⁶ asserts that youth are already practicing theological reflection and thus she invites youth workers to more

⁴³ Albert G. Miller. “What Jesus Christ and African American Teenagers are telling the African American Church.” *The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture 1997*, <http://www.ptsem.edu/iyml/lectures/1997/Miller-What.pdf>, (accessed on 5/20/07), 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also: C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1990), 309-310.

⁴⁵ Albert G. Miller. “What Jesus Christ and African American Teenagers are telling the African American Church.” *The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture 1997*, <http://www.ptsem.edu/iyml/lectures/1997/Miller-What.pdf>, (accessed on 5/20/07), 37, 41. Miller supports his conclusion by citing a study by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, who asked why youth and young adults were missing in Black churches. Surveying more than 2,100 Black ministers, they found that 21.5 percent thought “youth were not given a chance by adults to participate in a meaningful way in church programs.” In addition, 25 percent thought youth were “bored” and did not find “a relevant program for them” in the church. Based on his own experience with African American youth, Miller is also convinced that “many [youth] leave the church, in part, because they feel the church preaches, exhibits, and lives a Gospel that is not relevant to their concerns in the world. They are looking for a Gospel that is willing to speak the truth to those in power, to challenge the racist and exploitative situations in which many young people find themselves, and to affirm their cultural values.” [Quote from Almeda Wright, “Power of Testimonies” in Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, eds. *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 184]

⁴⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, David Rahn, and Chap Clark. *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*. (Zondervan, 2001)

intentional theological reflection on the lives and religious practices of and with youth.

Dean writes,

Approaching youth ministry from the perspective of practical theology assumes that youth are called to take part in every practice of Christian ministry... All Christians are called to be practical theologians, disciples whose obedience to God in the church and world puts our truth claims into practice.⁴⁷

Here, Dean intentionally blurs the lines between professional practical theologians and the tasks of “theologically reflecting on our Christian action” required of each Christian; however, she does so to emphasize the collective and intentional work of practical theology to which we must invite children and youth.⁴⁸

Similarly, religious educator and professor of youth and family ministries, Andrew Root outlines the significance of youth ministry as practical theology. Root writes that “Youth ministry is a practical theological discipline that seeks to construct a theology of action/practice for younger generations of people.” Root further argues that scholars of youth ministry “are those in the theological faculty that attend to reflection on God’s action in concrete locations where young people are present, seeking to construct theories born from practice that lead individuals and communities into faithful performative action in the world.”⁴⁹

Therefore, by offering a practical theological analysis of the spiritual lives of youth I am attempting to bridge the chasms created within the academy and between churches and youth. I affirm, with a growing number of scholars, that ongoing practical theological reflection is necessary for effective ministry with youth.

⁴⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean, et al. *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 19-21

⁴⁹ Andrew Root, “Practical Theology: What is it and how does it work?” *Journal of Youth Ministry*. Vol. 7 Number 2, Spring 2009, (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 2009), 71.

Methodologies with Marginal and Historically Oppressed Communities

Moving beyond the four major tasks (or three movements) of my practical theological analysis, in my dissertation my analytical methodology draws heavily upon ethnographic tools. In particular, in the first movement of *attending to the lived realities* and voices of African American adolescents, my methods of both collecting and sharing the youth narratives are influenced by the work and methods of Black and Latina feminist anthropologists and other scholars of color, who strive to give voice to the complex realities of historically marginalized communities.

For example, I borrow from the methodology of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in *En La Lucha*. In her text she utilizes the tools of ethnography and ethnographic interviews; Isasi-Diaz also introduces “meta-ethnography” as a way of making sense of the multiple accounts and interviews with her research participants. She begins by presenting the interviews, mostly as the women have articulated them, but then begins the process of bringing “together the single accounts by pointing out some of their commonalities and differences.”⁵⁰

Isasi-Diaz defines the analysis step of “meta-ethnography” as “knowledge synthesis ... [which] points out commonalities and differences...” She further describes the purpose of knowledge synthesis, writing

The purpose of this knowledge synthesis is not to establish norms and values –though they may be deduced quite easily—but to elucidate the self understanding of Latinas in order to contribute to the enhancement of their moral agency... The purpose of knowledge synthesis is not to examine what the women say to the point where the analysis and not the lived experiences of Latinas becomes central to the theological enterprise, but to

⁵⁰ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 68.

allow the voices of Latinas to be heard because they have a right to be heard.⁵¹

Isasi-Diaz's understanding of knowledge synthesis thus directly influenced my methodology in collecting and presenting the youth interviews in the next chapter. In particular, my larger goal in interviewing youth is to enhance their self understanding and agency. Likewise, I foreground the voices of youth because they "have a right to be heard" – not simply to support the theories I illumine about spirituality.

Isasi-Diaz also makes the case that this type of synthesis and interpretation should be done by someone from within the community (or one with an insider's perspective). She notes that "when the professional theologian is not herself part of the community—that is, when she has no vested interest in the liberation of others in the group—the dialogue becomes dishonest, the group being researched is objectified, and theology itself becomes a tool of oppression."⁵²At first, this stipulation seems harsh and antithetical to the practices of anthropology over the centuries –which is steeped in the idea that one needed objective distance in order to fully see what is happening in the community. However, Isasi-Diaz's argument is that researcher needs to be *invested in*, if not culturally part of, the community being researched. Even with this cultural and communal investment, there is the potential for exploitation, misrepresentation, and objectification. Therefore I heed Isasi-Diaz's warning and throughout the dissertation I am attentive to the ways that I am "using" the interview and survey data of the young people.

⁵¹ Ibid, 87-88

⁵² Ibid, 71, 132

Chapter Three: Talking Fragments

African American Youth Talk about the Fragments of Their Lives

Fragmented Spirituality and African American Youth

As noted above, fragmented or fractured spirituality is spirituality in which youth subconsciously or consciously relegate God to the realm of personal transformation and place societal change and systemic transformation in the realm of “utopia,” as things that one can wish for but never expect to happen. In this chapter, I continue building upon the research of religious educator Evelyn Parker and further explore “fragmented or fractured” spirituality among African American adolescents.⁵³ Thus in order to better understand the religious practices and worldviews of African American youth and to further explore Parker’s concept of fragmented spirituality, I conducted surveys and interviews with Christian youth from across the United States.

The research participants were selected from a sample of youth attending or affiliated with the Youth Theological Initiative Summer Academy at Emory University (YTI).⁵⁴ During YTI we interviewed and surveyed youth of African, European, Asian, and Latin American descent; however this chapter focuses only on youth of African descent, and occasionally refers to the larger group of youth surveyed and interviewed. The sample of youth of African descent included youth who self identified as African American, African, Jamaican, Cuban and some of mixed heritage. The youth in the

⁵³See Evelyn Parker, *Trouble Don’t Last Always*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 35-36. As noted in the introduction: Parker developed her understanding of fragmented spirituality drawing upon interviews with African American youth in the 1990s in the Chicago area. Her interviews gave examples of youth who were very confident and passionate in their descriptions of God working in their individual lives. However the youth utilized the language of “wishful thinking” in discussing their experiences of racism. The youth did not exhibit the same confidence or describe God working in their lives regarding racism.

⁵⁴All youth except one young man from the Atlanta community were YTI participants. I opened my research sample to include non-YTI students after noting the limited pool of African American males attending the 2008 YTI summer academy. Also none of the 2008 male participants chose to participate in the interviews. However, expanding my research pool did not produce a tremendous influx of willing African American male participants.

research were affiliated with Pentecostal, Apostolic, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ and non-denominational churches.⁵⁵ The research data includes survey data from fourteen youth and in-depth interviews with eight youth. The survey included ten females and four males, while the interview data included six females and two males.⁵⁶ All youth who took the survey were rising high school seniors, ages sixteen or seventeen; the youth who participated in the open ended interviews ranged in ages 16-19, the majority were rising high school seniors at the time of the interview and one student was a freshmen in college.

The surveys and interviews focused on four main questions:

- 1) Describe a typical day in your life – looking at school, friends, family, and church.
- 2) What are you or other youth concerned about? (Communal Concerns)
- 3) How do you see or experience God working in your life, your community, the government and/or the world? (Experiences of Church and Experiences of God)
- 4) How do you respond to things that you are concerned about? How are you working to make a difference in your community? (Communal Involvement)⁵⁷

⁵⁵ My research does not look at the spirituality of African American youth of non-Christian religious traditions and thus does not make any assumptions about their views and/or struggles to integrate their spirituality with other areas of their lives. Neither have I researched what this phenomenon looks like in non-religious, atheist, or seeking African American youth. However, my research and my primary research question looks at African American youth who self identify as Christians or who are actively involved in Christian communities.

⁵⁶ These interviews (conducted summer 2008) were also complemented by interviews conducted during YTI SA 2004-2007. The earlier interview years focused less specifically on questions that point to fragmentation in one's spirituality, but many of these issues emerge without asking specific questions. (as Parker noted in her research conducted in the 1990s). Of particular significance is that one of the male interviews was conducted in 2007, using a similar interview protocol; however this protocol did not ask explicitly about the role or work of God in politics and society. The second male was interviewed in Summer 2009, following the 2008 interview protocol.

Also, while there is some overlap in the survey and interview participants, methodologically I treat each survey and interview response as a discrete piece of data. The survey responses were collected anonymously via an online survey product and only requested demographic information such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, region, and denomination. Thus it is impossible to directly match survey responses with the responses of the youth interviewed. Also all youth surveyed were not interviewed and all interview participants did not complete the online survey.

⁵⁷ See Appendix B for full listing of youth interview questions. Within each of these sections of questions, I intentionally did not start by asking the young people what was wrong with their churches, etc. Instead I asked them to describe their schools, family, friends, and churches, and often in the process of describing they lifted up things that they were concerned about in those areas, as well as problems that they had experienced within their communities of faith. Also, in the

Voices and Perspectives on Spirituality and Fragmentation

In reviewing the interview and survey data, I emphasize that my purpose is to explore fragmentation among *this sample* of African American adolescents. I recognize that the size of my sample, as well as the self selecting nature of youth who chose to participate,⁵⁸ limits the ways that I can generalize about the entire population of African American Christian youth. However, this research data includes valuable narratives that enhance our knowledge of the ways that some African American youth are making sense of their spirituality and their concerns about their communities.

In other words, in this chapter I am not attempting to generalize the views of this sample of youth; my purpose is to highlight and take seriously the voices and concerns of particular young people. Therefore, I present the data by looking first at the narratives of five youth who participated in the in-depth interviews. I privilege their voices and quote their interviews at length. And while I attempt to “let the youth speak for themselves,” in this section I am not presenting raw data. The process of transcribing, editing and

interview process we talked about the ways that they feel supported and hindered in their lives – I asked specifically about resources and people they turned to in addressing their concerns and asked about the ways that they were involved in the community.

This summer the YTI research explored both the religious experiences and views of young people and some of the ways that youth were thinking about the world around them. Using open ended questions, we asked the youth to describe their hometown, friends, family, school and church – looking both at things they were excited about and things that concerned them. Through a series of short answer and Likert scale questions, we explored with each youth the theological perspectives of their religious communities and their understanding of God. We also surveyed youth regarding their concept of “making a difference in the world.” We asked them about experiences they had working in their communities and observing others in their communities. The qualitative interviews from the past summer academy centered on Spirituality and Civic Engagement – asking youth to reflect on the concerns they see and experience in their communities, the types of actions they take and/or want to take, as well as the resources they turn to for guidance and support in working to affect change in their communities.

⁵⁸ I make this assertion about the data sample because it is not sufficiently large (N=22; 14 surveyed and 8 interviewed) and it is not a random sample. It is rather a sample of convenience because the majority of the youth are selected from YTI applicants.

selecting which aspects of the interviews to include already reflects my influence and interpretation.

In the second part of the chapter, I look collectively at all the interviews and survey results to point toward generative themes in the ways that these young African Americans are thinking about their community, their agency, and their God or religion. I present the data in this way, because when we explore fragmentation, it is important to not only see their response to particular questions; but it is also important to see how their narratives and experiences of different settings intersect. Therefore in describing each youth I attend to their autobiographical narratives and to the stories that they explored in the most detail; I explore how these narratives interconnect with their responses to questions about their communities and concerns, their experiences of church and God, and their action in the world.

Individual Narratives: Snapshots of Youth Concerns and Spiritual Lives

Kira—*“People get used to hearing about death, especially young death ... it wasn’t no remorse, it was nothing like ‘let’s come together’.”*

Kira is an African American young woman from Florida, who lives with her mother and two older siblings. She also spends time with her father often and animatedly recounts the days when she explores new places in her hometown with her father. Kira spent the majority of her interview talking about her church and her school—noting how central each of these are to her life. Kira’s family life is very connected with her church life. Kira’s church is a small apostolic church, which her mother started in their home when Kira was a baby. Her mother continues to serve as pastor today. Kira and her siblings also participate in the worship services and church programs at least 3 times a

week. As a result, Kira sees church as an integral part of her life. While, Kira estimates that they have less than thirty members in their church and describes the process of members transitioning in and out of the congregation; she is very proud that they have their own building now and is optimistic that God will provide for their spiritual growth.⁵⁹

Throughout YTI and during her interview, Kira talked of her spiritual life often and easily – she relayed her beliefs about how Christians should interact in the world. In her interview she described times when she went “witnessing” in her community and how exciting it was for her to see other young people walking through the neighborhood sharing their faith in Jesus.⁶⁰ She also shares her church’s understanding of God’s work in the world, saying:

I think we kind of look at it like we are just vessels of God, and ... if we want to see a difference in the world, we got to let God fully work through us. Like we going to take the limits off ... So we kind of look at it like we’re vessels of God and if we want to see a change in the world, then we got to let Him fully use us to let a change happen.⁶¹

In her interview, Kira also describes her school as a predominately African American and failing school. When asked to describe the size by estimating the number in a graduating class, she candidly responded: “Not too many graduate...And when it’s 75 that’s like a

⁵⁹ Kira’s Interview Transcript, p.9, lines 385-396.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.10, lines 416-423. Kira uses the language of “witnessing” throughout her interview. Witnessing often refers to the practice of going through a particular neighborhood, walking “door-to-door”, or simply having a conversation with another person about one’s beliefs as a Christian. Witnessing may also include sharing of “testimonies” or narratives that recount the ways that being a Christian have affected the lives of the testifier or witness.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 11, lines 464-469

In this quote we see that Kira has an amazing understanding of God working through her, but her response feels somewhat passive... “let a change happen.” And I wonder if her understanding of God could support ways that she “makes” change happen and works more aggressively. Also her response does not fully address some of the particular ways that she understands God working or even what types of things she sees God doing through her. However, she did speak previously about taking clothes to people around her (p. 10, lines 421-428) and praying for deliverance from drug addictions and poverty (p. 10, lines 452-455)

big deal.”⁶² She also shared many of the concerns she has for youth and her community. She initially named her concern that many young people are struggling with image. For Kira, image is not limited to body-image, but has more to do with reputation, personality, and living up to preconceived standards in a culture that shuns particular attributes. Kira described her concern about image, stating:

... image I think is a big thing in the society. And when I say image, like in different cultures, I think it's different things you have to live up to. Like in our cultures, it's like that hip hop ... some girls they want to be ride or die chicks, you know. [Interviewer: What is a ride or die chick?] You know, like when they get and ride with them bad boys and everything, and you know, they get involved with little cliques and everything ... it's just a lot of drama, and it comes from them listening to that music, and they don't know that they're the hip hop sides, they're not really living that life, or they're really trying to live that life and everything and they hear about how the girls, you know. So I think that's what a lot of girls have to face. [Interviewer: Some of that is with body image stuff, what to wear and even some of their attitudes?] Yeah, and where you hang out at, how you handle certain situations, if so and so put this in your face or something like that, how you handle situations. So it's like, for boys it would be, not be like a punk and for girls it's also not to be like a punk, because they want to be like, you know, I don't know – it's like hard to explain.⁶³

Kira also expressed concern about youth violence and shootings in her school and community. She talked about worrying over the summer, because of the very real possibility that she could go back to school and hear that one of her classmates had been shot while they were on vacation.

... things that I worry about is that, ...and something I forget I need to pray about it, but like to come back to school and ...oh, you heard where so-and-so got shot during the summer or something like that, you know, because during the summertime ...that's like when the biggest thing is gun violence, I mean it's been ridiculous bad. So that's like my worst fear to come back to school and hear like, oh, did you hear ... a girl that was 16 years old went to [my high school] got shot in the head running away from the club. And it was like, oh, gosh. And then somebody else ended up

⁶² Ibid, p.3 lines 116-123

⁶³ Ibid, p. 15, lines 645-666.

getting shot. It's like, and then everybody was scared because it's like, [they're] going to come to [my high school] and shoot it up and everything. So everybody was like, y'all ready to die, y'all ready to die, and everything. So that's like my biggest fear is to come back to school like this year, like going back from summer here, like, oh, you heard so-and-so got shot during the summer or was found somewhere or something like that. That's my biggest fear. It's crazy.⁶⁴

She also talked about her desire that the youth in her school could come together in response to the gun violence (and stop fighting). She stated that underneath all the conflict, they all really just want to be loved. In seeing this common need, she remains frustrated by their inability to “come together.” In the interview I also asked her about the types of resources (people, religious practices, writing, etc.) she used to help her respond to the violence in her community. Kira replied:

First, it was just like it just took me back because it was like, oh, God, because the reason – what happened was, we was coming home from church and we just saw a whole bunch of police and everything and I just overlooked it. And then when I got to school, it was like, Shaniqua got shot in the head. And so it was like a big thing. Everybody was scared because they thought that whoever shot her was going to retaliate again, so everybody was like, oh, they're going to come up, like I said, they was going to show up at school. But I think what happened is, people get so used to hearing about death that they become numb. So it wasn't no coming together and cry and moan. It wasn't that. It was just like, here, we're going to put a big old piece of paper up here and give a shout out to Shaniqua. You know, it was like a piece of paper and it was like, Miss You. But then after that, another girl got shot walking home, but she didn't die, though. And so people get so used to hearing about death, especially young death, being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Because it was like late at night. She had no reason, 16 years old, being out late, late at night at a club. So you hear about that so much that it wasn't no remorse, it was nothing like, let's come together.⁶⁵

Kira also worries that people are numb to youth violence because of the frequency with which it occurs in her community. In response to the shooting of Shaniqua, she noted that at school the students and teachers were all scared; however instead of becoming a life

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp 15-16, lines 684-697.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 17, lines 744-763

changing event the shooting became something trivial. The event was trivialized by the insufficient response of “[putting] a big old piece of paper up... and [giving] a shout out to Shaniqua.”⁶⁶

Although Kira struggles not to become numb to the frequent occurrence of violence in her school, Kira describes feeling called to respond. She states that as a Christian she witnesses⁶⁷ to people at her school because she wants them to understand the value of life and the severity of the violence around them:

[Interviewer: do you sometimes feel a particular need or a calling to respond to some of the things?] Yes, all the time, because being a Christian I feel like it’s a need for me to do something and that’s where it comes to play, with the Bible study in the classrooms after school. And then sometimes we would even, either during lunch, we would go out, we went around in the cafeteria witnessing, and people be like, are y’all playing? No, we are really serious. So I do feel like it’s a need just to let them know that their life is not nothing to play with. Once you’re dead, you’re dead. I do feel the need.⁶⁸

Her response through “witnessing” illumines her theological convictions and demonstrates that her perspective on youth violence is one of ultimate concern, in that she believes that if these young people die and “have not been saved,” they will go to Hell.⁶⁹ Her theological convictions are further illumined in her assertion that God can

⁶⁶ Ibid, p 17, lines 756-758

⁶⁷ See my discussion of Kira’s usage of the term “witnessing” in note 8 above. However, beyond the sharing of one’s individual experience, witnessing can also have the dimension of asking others about their experience or “relationship” with Jesus. It can include an invitation to become a Christian, to repent from sins, to be baptized, and/or pray a prayer of confession.

It is the belief of the testifier or witness that it is their responsibility to share what they know about God, Jesus, Christianity, etc. so that others can also know and with their knowledge have the opportunities that come with such knowledge and confession. For the most part (and in Kira’s case), the ultimate goal of witnessing is for others to become Christians and to “be saved” and go to heaven, when they die.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 18

⁶⁹ However, I wonder if there is room in her theological understanding for concerns about how to make things better now. I tried to discuss this with her, but it was harder to ask about this, when I am not sure I even know what a more theologically robust or “here and now” response would look like. In this way I know that while I wonder if her approach of witnessing and bible study, so that her peers can get saved before they die (in the face of the very immediate threat of violence) is sufficient; I wonder more if a

help her overcome anything, even this type of random youth violence. She articulates her understanding that she is not struggling against “physical things,” but against “spiritual things.” Kira asserts that “knowing God” empowers her because she knows that she has God to help her.⁷⁰

However, Kira’s response also demonstrates that she does not see many tangible resources in her community for responding to her concerns about youth violence. Furthermore, when reflecting on her experiences in her community, she points out a connection between racism⁷¹ and the ways that her school and her principal did not help the young people grieve after the deaths of their classmates. Kira discusses the ways that her principal attempted to silence any response to the violence and deaths:

... a lot of people at [my high school] feel like we [have] a lot of racist things, because it’s predominantly black. And we sometimes feel like we’re in ... an F school. So sometimes we feel like...if anything bad happened at ... it’s all over the news. ... *and I think that’s why they don’t make too big an issue – like the gunshot thing, because they don’t want it to be a big issue. Like, you know, because that might bring some more bad media. ... the principal didn’t say anything about it, [and] if she overheard me asking somebody about the girl that got killed, she was like, ... don’t even talk about it because we already got a bad reputation.*⁷²

protest, rally, movement to end youth violence in her community would work for this type of change or is sufficient either.

⁷⁰ Kira Interview Transcript, p. 18, lines 816-820

“Knowing God has helped me to face struggles as looking at it as something that I can overcome. Just looking at something knowing that it’s not something physical that I’m fighting against, it is something spiritual that I’m fighting against and that – first of all, I can’t do it by myself, either. And just to know that I can overcome it, nothing is too hard for God and things He would overcome.”

Here again I appreciate that she has this spiritual framework, because it appears to help her make meaning in the face of this situation of youth violence. However, I also wonder what it would look like for her understanding to be stretched to see that she’s dealing *both* with spiritual and physical things. Also while her assertion that “she cannot do it alone” leads her to see that God is her help, I wonder what her spirituality would look like if she also understood this to mean that God is calling her to partner with other humans to work for change and to resist the escalating trends of violence in their lives.

⁷¹ Here she is defining racism as experienced in being part of an under resourced, predominately African American, failing school and the inability of people to change perceptions based on race.

⁷² Ibid, p. 21, lines 913-922

In other words, Kira does not see the necessary resources to respond to violence and sees the ways that her teachers are hindered by the racism and prejudices into not fully acknowledging the systemic problems in her community.

Marissa – “my church is constantly begging for youth and when they have them in the church, they like run them off.”

Marissa is a young woman from New Jersey. Her parents are both professionals and immigrants from Jamaica. Marissa associates herself with the culture and trends of New York City. In her interview, she described her frequent trips to “the city” with her friends. She is also very proud of her hometown, a suburb of New York City with a legacy of progressive civil rights work and early movements for social change. Marissa also expresses her appreciation for and awareness of the sacrifices her parents have made so that she can live in her upper middle class community and go to excellent schools. Beyond discussing her hometown and family, in her interview Marissa focused on her friends and her school. Marissa also discussed her church, but was less enthusiastic about her experiences in church. For example, when asked to describe a powerful or significant religious experience, Marissa honestly noted that she did not remember ever having a powerful experience in her church. However, in discussing the role of her faith in her life now, Marissa described how winning a contest made her more religious, by confirming her understanding of God’s plan for her life:

[Interviewer: Can you think of a way your faith community has helped you become who you are today?] So, I won a contest with Nike, because I want to be a sneaker designer when I grow up and after that, I totally knew that this is what [God] wants me to do and ever since then, I was way more religious than I was before because I realized He did this for me and he could easily . . .if He didn’t do that for me, then I would not have known and I probably would have been like bummed, but since He put me

in that position, He really wants me to go forth with who I am and wants me to be me.⁷³

In spite her assertion that God blessed her and her implicit belief in God, Marissa describes questioning whether she is a Christian. She knows that her church community would affirm that she is because she attends every Sunday; but, she questions church attendance as the standard or definition of being a Christian. Thus she wonders what being a Christian means for her. When asked if there were any questions that she was currently exploring or working through, she stated:

I think, whether I'm a Christian. I don't know if I would consider myself that or if . . . I guess my church can easily say that I'm a Christian only because I show up every Sunday but I don't know if I would because there is this quote that is one of my favorites that says "I'm a citizen of the world and my religion is to do good" and I think that's exactly what I am. I think my question every night would be if I'm a Christian and what is that...

In following up, Marissa revealed that this question had not been at the forefront of her mind until she came to YTI and encountered other youth who expressed their Christianity in different ways:

coming to YTI opened up the question for me only because I see so many people that are religious and so many people that like actually follow the Ten Commandments and stuff like that, to a point that I don't and I guess I'm shunned . . . but I don't put myself [down], I don't make myself feel bad for it. I think that God likes me the way I am.⁷⁴

Marissa also spoke candidly about the social struggles and concerns of youth. In particular, Marissa discussed interpersonal relationships as a concern of many youth. Specifically speaking about her experience at YTI, she named that "many people still only feel comfortable with their own race" and form cliques around race.⁷⁵ However, she

⁷³ Marissa's Interview Transcript, p 9, lines 366-374

⁷⁴ Marissa Interview Transcript, p 10, lines 415-419

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 10

also named similar concerns in her hometown and school. Marissa recounted her experience of inconsistency in student-teacher relationships.⁷⁶ She described this discrepancy in terms of the racism in her school.

I guess [a concern] would be relationships from teacher to student. Some have that and which is really weird because our school is very diverse but **you can totally tell that some teachers prefer keeping a more personal relationship with white students than they do blacks.** They always say I'm here after school and I can help you, but they want to keep it . . . when it comes to white students, it's a more personal relationship. My best friend who is white, would see her teacher after and before school and it got so personal to the point where she was invited to her wedding and she would text her. So I don't think it's fair that you are allowed to do that.⁷⁷

Marissa's discussions of the interactions between teachers and students based on race indicated that she is not hopeful that things can get better or that she can do anything to respond or change these interactions. She states: "I don't think you can change it because it is something that will always occur whether you try to stop it or not."⁷⁸

In addition to her experience of racism in relationships with teachers, Marissa also described the dynamics of racism within her larger community. For example, Marissa described "white flight" in her community, which she defined stating:

our school experiences ... White Flight and what that is is that a lot of white students will leave the schools where they know there are a lot of blacks getting into honor classes ... and AP courses so our town itself, ...[it is] predominately Jewish, but our public school is majority black ... and the Jewish people they get upset because they don't want to pay taxes for public schooling when their kids are in a whole different school.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Initially I expected her to talk about her desire for mentoring, for in other parts of her interview I saw the need for better mentoring as a recurring theme. In particular she does not name a great deal of adults with whom she feels comfortable talking about important stuff. However, her perspective on race based affiliations in student-teacher relationships indicated to her the reality of racism and injustice. See Marissa's Interview Transcript, p.10, line 435

⁷⁷ Ibid, p 11, lines 466-474

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 11, lines 478-9

While I do not want to label her nihilistic in her understanding of racism, I note that she does not feel empowered to stand up for herself and call out racist teachers. I also note that her church is not a place where she can find or would seek help with this.

⁷⁹ Marissa's Interview Transcript, pp. 2-3, lines 88-99

While, I did not probe further to find out how she learned or became familiar with the term “white flight,” she spoke of it in a “matter of fact” manner and further described her experiences of getting harassed and stopped for “jay walking” when the Black students from her public high school left campus each day for lunch.⁸⁰

When asked if her faith or faith community helped her deal with struggles like these, Marissa gave a forthright exchange on how her church is ineffective in helping her see or make sense of things going on in the world. She also explicitly rejected the idea of talking to a church leader about some of the issues she sees going on around the world.

She responded quite adamantly:

A: I don't think [my church] does very much because my church is constantly begging for youth and when they have them in the church, they like run them off, they are constantly “you can't do this” and it violates our youth so I don't think [the church] does much to open our eyes to see the struggle or anything.

Q: Are there particular practices that help you make sense of the turbulent situations of the world, like prayer, meditation, Bible reading?

A: No. I don't think it helps us see things going on around the world.

Q: Do you have specific people that you take your questions and struggles to?

A: My therapist. It's all the rage in the TriState, so yeah, it would be him.

Q: Can you talk to a leader in your church?

A: I could but would I want to? No.⁸¹

However, juxtaposed with Marissa's belief that she cannot respond to the biases of her teachers and the ineffectiveness of her church, she expresses more hope, inspiration, and agency in responding to global concerns. For example, Marissa names

Marissa appears to use Jewish and white interchangeably in this section of her interview. But this also speaks to her awareness of some particularities to her experiences of difference and racism in her community. At first, I did not want to present her statements as overly inflammatory or to not obscure my larger point of her awareness of issues of discrimination and their disconnection from her religious reflections; however, in order to honor her experiences I have presented her statements intact.

⁸⁰ Marissa's Interview Transcript, pp. 2-3, lines 86-101

⁸¹ Ibid, pp 12-13, lines 543-566

sex trafficking as a global concern which she desires to respond to “when she gets older.” Also in contrast to the ineffectiveness of her church or faith in responding to her struggle at school, Marissa names online communities that are raising awareness about sex trafficking, and in turn are supporting her in responding:

There is a blog on [sex trafficking] and there’s these graffiti artists from France and I graffiti too and they move it as a movement. It’s really awesome. They graffitied on a bunch of little trailers and they showed a story of the life of someone who has been sex trafficked and it’s amazing because they traveled everywhere and they put it in the most . . .it’s like an exhibition where they just put it in a lot of political areas so they can get the word out and I just keep up with that a lot to see what I can do in the future.⁸²

Marissa’s ambiguity about her identity as a Christian and her assertion that the church does not help her respond to the concerns of youth and other global issues parallels with her reflections on the role of God in government or politics. When asked about how or where she experiences God working in the government, Marissa voices her uncertainty about the role that God plays in the government and her concerns about the ways that religion and politics have been converging recently.⁸³ Her concerns focus on the self-identification of particular politicians as Christian and actions that seem incongruent with such identifications. However, moving beyond these concerns, Marissa talks about particular occurrences of injustices in the government. She states:

Our society does not think that God is in the government because of the Shawn Bell case, or simple cases where people have been shot and killed by the police and *there is nothing you can do about it*. I think that people give up that God is there and that’s probably why I’m on the fence whether He is there or not. I think He is but people don’t pay attention.⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid, pp11-12, lines 501-507

⁸³ Ibid, pp 13-14, lines 587-603.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p 14

Throughout her reflections on God's work in government, Marissa talks about what "people" think. However, only at the very end, does she name that she is really uncertain as to whether God is working in government—her firmest reply is that she thinks God is present in government, but people do not want to pay attention to God's presence there.

Jackie – *“I’m concerned that each generation is getting worse . . . I just hope that they realize that life’s not all about gangs and drugs and being ghetto and stuff like that.”*

Jackie is an African American, high school senior from California, where she lives with her mother. As she begins her interview, Jackie simply rehearses the events of her day and spends less than five lines describing what she does during a typical day. However, Jackie becomes more expressive as she talks about her hometown and school. For example, Jackie describes her school as a diverse and high-achieving public school, which attracts substantial monetary gifts from local businesses. Jackie is also aware of the ways that her school works hard to “keep things hidden” –in that the administrators are reluctant to discuss negative activities that take place at her school. Jackie describes this saying, “...We have issues at our school every now and then, riots and certain things, but you would never know because it’s a little city. It’s inside [her hometown], so you wouldn’t know a lot of stuff that goes on.”⁸⁵

Jackie becomes most animated as she is discussing her friends and family. She lists each of their names, how she met them, and even chats about losing her phone, which limited her ability to keep in touch with them over the summer. In particular, Jackie describes her admiration for her mother and father. She eagerly talks about their

⁸⁵ Jackie’s Interview Transcript, p. 2, lines 69-72.

commitment to education and knows that education is one thing that they value for her life. She notes:

[My parents] both had trouble when they first went to college and then they both finished. My dad is getting his Ph.D. right now. My mom graduated from college when I was about in fifth grade. And they both graduated with honors, straight As. My mom's really like the hardest worker I've ever seen like in my life. I can't even explain it. But she just works really, really hard.⁸⁶

Jackie also describes her extended family and recounts memories of summers with her father and grandparents. Both her father and her grandfather are pastors, who influenced her religious formation; however, Jackie also talks of the way her church affiliation changed and became more self-directed, when she moved to a new city.

My grandpa is a pastor. He has his own church. My dad's a reverend. So every summer if I visit them, I go to their church. They're Baptists. But religion, my grandparents in Seattle don't go to church. And my mom used to always take me to a Baptist church when I was little. And then when we moved to [her hometown], we lived right down the street from a Presbyterian church that had good Bible study classes that my neighbor went to, so I started going there. And I used to not like church until about high school maybe. Then I got into the youth group – or middle school – and so now I go to church on my own every Sunday. My mom doesn't really go to church anymore because she's really busy. So I just have her drop me off every morning and I go to youth group and do whatever they do together and that's it.⁸⁷

While, Jackie's discussion of her church involvement emphasizes both her parental influence and the ways that she participates in church on her own, she is clear that she enjoys going to church because of the types of relationships that she develops there as well. Jackie, in turn describes the most important aspects of her faith community as their openness:

I like people to see how open my church is and my faith. And how we don't push stuff on each other. Like it's not read the Bible every Sunday.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 6, lines 232-236

⁸⁷ Jackie Interview Transcript, p.5, lines 211-223

I think we barely – we pull out the Bible, we'll read one verse, but then we'll like relate it to our everyday lives and how we can incorporate it and stuff like that. And then like my church isn't just about God all the time. We've had Sundays where we've had to sit in a circle and just talk to each other about the problems we're having with each other. Like we had one Sunday, they were looking at our MySpaces, and they were like, okay, we see a lot of stuff on your MySpace that you never tell us. All this hurt, all this pain. So they made us all sit in a circle and just talk about everything that we've had problems with each other. And then they just prayed over everyone was crying, it was like crazy. So we do a lot of stuff like that. We're really like a second family. And I want people to know that's what church is. It's not just about studying God all the time. It's about making your lives better for God.⁸⁸

Despite Jackie's excitement about the relationships she develops in her youth group, her primary experience of youth group is in tension with her experience participating in the life of the larger congregation. She shares both that she finds the worship services to be boring and she recounts an experience of her youth choir attempting to sing in the larger worship services. Her narrative points to the ways that she has become well connected with her youth group, but her youth group is disconnected from the rest of the life of the church:

I don't know, they've had issues between ... the adults at the church and the youth group. And it kind of like – like when we had choir ... I remember them saying, hinting at things like they didn't want us to really sing in the church. My youth group is predominantly black. Well, it's all black. And then like we've had like gays and bisexuals in my group, just a lot of stuff like that. And so from the way it seemed – and my pastor is white. He's really cool, though. But from the way it seemed like, they didn't want us to really perform in church. They wanted us to get involved. They always come in every year and talk to us about tithes and offerings and stuff. But everything else is kind of like whatever. But it's gotten better. It always seemed like they didn't really care about us. But we always had our youth pastor. So that was like our church in that church. And so it kind of seemed separated.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Jackie interview transcript, p. 7, lines 275-291

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 8, lines 324-336

Moving beyond the tensions she experiences within her church community, Jackie also names areas that concern her about the young people in her school and community:

I'm concerned that each generation is getting worse, and eventually – like in my school I can see it getting worse. Like each grade is full of more people that don't care about school and stuff, and just don't really care about their grades. And ...there are a lot of gangs. There are a lot of drugs. A lot of people smoke and stuff, so my concern is that everyone is going to let that type of life get in the way of the life they should have...I live in a pretty good community. My school is a good school. They're not awful people or anything. But I just hope that they realize that life's not all about gangs and drugs and being ghetto and stuff like that.⁹⁰

However, she was somewhat tentative in naming the types of concerns she saw when she looked more globally, in politics or on the news. She asserts that she never watches the news, because of the way that it reminds her of tragedy that is taking place in her community:

... the one time I did watch the news, it was around the time that everyone was getting shot for some reason ... and they're both really personal to me. One – they were shot right next to my house, like my mom heard it. It was at the bank. That night we went to the memorial service and it was really sad... what was even more sad to me was that the person that shot the guy was with someone else that didn't know what was going on at all. She just thought he was going to get money. So now she's in jail for being with him. And that's really sad to me, too. And then the other kid that got shot, he got shot because he didn't – he wasn't part of a gang at all. And so they killed him. And that was right next to a friend's house. And she lives like in a really nice part of [our city] and everything. I just don't like people getting shot. I wish that would change.⁹¹

Jackie voices her concerns for her community, pointing both to the underlying changes in attitude that she hopes for and her “wish” that shootings would cease in her community.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 9,

⁹¹ Ibid, p.9.

Elliot⁹² -- *“I’m into activism a lot...I fight for a lot of different things even if I don’t necessarily include myself in that group or whatever.”*

Elliot is a 19 year old college freshman from the southeast. In his interview, he talks about his experience growing up and living in the same community for the entirety of his life, including college. Elliot begins his interview recounting the endless list of activities that fill his days. He commutes between campus and home, with his parents. He also balances his love of music, three jobs, spending time with his friends, and his recent activism work. Elliot talks extensively and proudly about his activism. He states that beyond his love of music,

I’m also into activism. I’ve gotten a lot into that lately. I represent a lot of different demographics and I fight for a lot of different things even if I don’t necessarily include myself in that group or whatever. I do African-American, urban development, homelessness, LGBT issues, pretty much a wide array of things that I’m involved in ...⁹³

I am currently a political science major, philosophy minor, and what really got me attracted to the different organizations, I worked with an organization called Black Out. Organizations like Tighter Grip, which is an African-American initiative... It’s kind of like a tutoring network ... for African-American men, and Black Out is actually the LGBT African-American force on campus.

There is Social Justice Project, which I helped found, which I think is pretty big for a freshman....Social Justice Project is basically the clearinghouse for [my college] and its variety of different causes and organizations ... where they can all come together and network. And see what the other ones need and see where they can help each other out so it can be a bigger force on and off campus, and ... I’ve gotten a little bit involved with the International Affairs and those different initiatives, but definitely being a political science major has attracted me to all those. *Wanting to get out and meet people, wanting to actually have something to stand for and leave your mark.* And especially since I’m wanting to get involved in politics some day, it’s definitely a good starting point.⁹⁴

⁹² Elliot was one of the few youth interviewed, who did not attend YTI. Elliot was also one of the older youth interviewed. He was interviewed after his senior year of high school as he was transitioning to college life.

⁹³ Elliot’s Interview Transcript, p.2., lines 58-64,

⁹⁴ Elliot Interview Transcript, p. 7, lines 229-251.

He notes that his activism work emerges primarily from his academic environment and his career aspirations, in that he is a Political Science major and wants to be involved in politics in some manner in the future.

Elliot also describes some apprehension about attending a large state school, with a very diverse body of about 40,000 students. However, instead of feeling lost in such a large population, Elliot saw student activism organizations as helping him “stay afloat.”

Definitely the organizations that I’ve gotten involved in, they have kept me afloat at [college], kept me from, you know, just being that person who just goes to class and goes home. I have a reason to stay down there and definitely with working with those different organizations, I’ve gotten involved with the faculty... And it’s definitely been some good experiences with the different organizations, but that’s mainly what has kept me excited about going to school there.⁹⁵

Elliot also was candid about some of his struggles in choosing a college to attend. During high school he had aspirations of attending a smaller private liberal arts college; however because of a lack of scholarship money he had to attend a larger public college in his hometown. And while his public college was not his first choice it became a place where he could combine his interests and commitments to social justice.

In addition to his academic motivations for his activism, Elliot describes being actively involved in his church family and the influence of the church on his current community involvement. In many ways Elliot understands himself as a “church baby”—because he grew up in his church and has remained a member of the same church since birth. When asked to describe a time when he felt passionate about being involved in his church community, Elliot recounts examples of singing in the children’s choir, and then the youth choir; and going through the process of becoming a “Jr. Deacon” at the age of 13 or 14. This process included training classes and a culminating celebration; he credits

⁹⁵Ibid, p. 6 lines 200-211

the experience with pushing him out of his comfort zone and encouraging him to be more visible and actively engaged in the life of the church and the community, and to grow in his expressions of his spirituality and practices of worship:

... that taught me a lot of things. That got me more out there. ... I had to pray for the first time in front of a lot of people. I had to speak in front of large crowds and just being so much more involved.⁹⁶

Elliot further describes the way that this experience helped him to feel “closer to God”:

As a junior deacon... being pushed out of your comfort zone and asked to do certain things, you definitely have to have somewhere where you're not just going... to go insane and crumble to the ground. Because if your comfort zone is over here and you're way down there somewhere, you have to have something that will at least bring - either bring your comfort zone back to you or,...take you back to it some kind of way, and so definitely that felt like, ... being closer to God, [and God] was bringing me back to a comfort zone even if I was out of it. It made me feel comfort and so I was able to do things like pray publicly, speak publicly and even build up my own spiritual base within myself.⁹⁷

Elliot is also able to name the many ways that his church's teachings have evolved overtime, because of his long standing participation in this church. In particular, he describes a process of the church becoming more welcoming and affirming of gays and lesbians. While Elliot states that he was not old enough to fully grasp the details of the changing beliefs, he remembers the effects it had on his relationships at church, as

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 17-18, lines 578-584

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 19, lines 618-645 Elliot also describes other experiences in his community of faith that helped him become closer to God. For example, he describes having to learn more about the Bible and God in order to teach in the Children's Chapel. He also becomes very animated as he describes the experience of singing in the choir – as this combines his passion for music and his experiences with God and the community:

and even with the choir, it's like you feel something when you're actually up there and you're singing. You're doing something more so - even more so with the choir, that's music. That's - that's my every . . . that's like almost my everything to me, like that's my - at my core is music, and so it's like you're doing music, that's something that you love to do, but you're doing it for even a higher purpose. So it's like, you know, you just have to recognize who you're singing for and what you're singing for and it's definitely - it's easy to realize it when you're around that environment. The people who love the same things that you love.

some of his closest friends and their families left the church. However, he names his parents' decision to stay at the church as having a tremendous effect on what he understands about God. For example, he sees the core of his church's teachings as asserting that "God is still speaking":

I know we started as [a] Baptist Church and had a lot of Baptist traditions and things like that and we still do there - definitely they're at our core. However, I think the message has changed more so that God is still speaking. I know if you go to a lot of different Baptist churches and more traditional churches, it's like this is the Bible, this is what that is and this is what we go by. However, there's not really anything saying that God is still around ... you have to have your own realization of what God is within yourself ...⁹⁸

Building on his assertions about God still speaking, Elliot also states that his church teaches him that God should have a very active role in the world. Elliot includes an array of arenas where he understands God to work, but summarizes his understanding of God as being like a personal therapist at times:

[Interviewer: what is [your church's] understanding of how God is supposed to work in the world?] Definitely active, an active working out, like in every single aspect of your life, in every single aspect of everybody else's life, politics, economy, ... international affairs, your personal affairs, definitely, you know, seeking God in every - for every, ... problem that you may have or even solution that you may have. Consulting, like - *kind of like a personal therapist at times*, definitely you have a question, sit on the couch and ask, you know?⁹⁹

Related to his understanding of the different places that he sees God working, he also names a variety of concerns that young people are struggling with. While he is grateful for very supportive parents, he describes the ways that many of his friends, some of whom were struggling with their sexual identity, did not have family or other adults to talk with. Looking at the larger society, Elliot is also aware of the ways that the economy

⁹⁸ Elliot's Interview Transcript, p. 20, lines 665-670 and lines 680-683

⁹⁹ Ibid.

is affecting young people, as they are struggling to find part time jobs or where they feel the effects of parents getting laid off. Elliot also enumerates many political concerns, such as legislature on same-sex marriage and hate crime laws, which he wants to see changed. Elliot does not simply name these concerns, but he confidently speaks of feeling a need to respond and know that he will do something “big” in his own community:

It's - it's a very big need, I feel. I mean ... I know with me being, ... tailored to do something within politics now being the political aide and that's only going to grow to something bigger. I know I'm going to eventually have to do something within my own community that's going to be big. And I definitely see myself being a part of some kind of struggle within the same sex community and even outside that as an African-American period, ... I don't necessarily know at this point, because there are so many different things that I'm passionate about; whether it be gay rights or something within music or something with somebody on the street or something like that, but I just know that eventually it's going to come a time where I'm going to have to step up and play my part.¹⁰⁰

However, he is uncertain about the catalyst for his need to work for change; he states that “I don't know where it comes from. It's - it's - it's just - it's just there.”¹⁰¹

Elliot concludes his interview stating a final concern of youth and how youth are engaged. He simply asserts that youth are all different and youth should not be pigeon holed or stereotyped:

we're just all different. I've met a wide variety of different African-American men and women and of people of other races and as young adults... we have so many different views, so many different places we want to go ... so it's definitely something that you want to remember is that we all have different views and different feelings about different things, and so if someone was to ever approach a young person, you have to approach it differently. Like for instance in court, it seems like all people are approached - all young adults are approached the same way, as a criminal, when in actuality we all have different situations. We've all been in different things and this situation is most likely definitely different from the other situation, so why look at it so objectively?¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Elliot's Interview Transcript, p. 32, lines 1072-1082

¹⁰¹ Elliot's Interview Transcript, p. 33, line 1092.

¹⁰² Elliot's Interview Transcript, p.38, lines 1274-1286

Danielle – *“my community...it’s...not really a community where you can gung ho go out and do community service and...change something.”*

Danielle is a 17 year old who lives in Georgia. She was born in Jamaica and moved to the United States when she was in elementary school. In her interview she described fond memories of Jamaica and her experience relocating to a predominately African American suburb in Georgia. Danielle began her interview animatedly describing her typical day at school and emphasized the central role of her friends and running track to her life at school. While she is aware of what she calls “typical high school drama,”¹⁰³ she offers an overall positive perspective on her school. She describes her school, saying: “I love the classes... they do a really good job of picking teachers that are really passionate about what they want to do, so you get a really good education.”¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Danielle’s description of her school is complicated by stereotypes of predominately black schools; for Danielle notes that her school is diverse *and* a very good school. She illumines this tension in her understanding of her school as she states:

We have like 51% black I think last time I checked. Like 30% Latino or Indian and then about 20 something white, I think, something around there. And so it’s like a good mix. It’s *I guess I wouldn’t say it was like a black school because the administration runs it like a really good school so I live in suburbia and so it doesn’t really have too much of like the problems that they associate with like black, predominantly black schools so it’s doing pretty good...*¹⁰⁵

Another primary influence in Danielle’s life is her family. Danielle describes her close relationship with her parents and older siblings. She describes her parents, who have been married for 30 years and are both teachers, as “traditional Jamaican”—in that

¹⁰³Danielle’s Interview Transcript, p. 3. She describes typical drama as “sex, drugs, and just talking about people, and half the time it’s not true.

¹⁰⁴ Danielle’s Interview Transcript, p. 3, lines 93-95

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, pp.2-3, lines 81-87

they require particular manners and ways of addressing adults. She also explains how her parents' struggles in Jamaica shape their priorities for her. Danielle describes her parents as constantly encouraging her to work really hard and warning her about "wasting her potential."¹⁰⁶

Another key component in Danielle's life is her United Methodist church, which she describes as another family. She recognizes that her church is very supportive of her; and she understands the core of their teachings as love.¹⁰⁷ She feels proud to be part of her church when they go into the surrounding communities and serve others.

Although Danielle's interview is overwhelmingly positive, she does not hesitate to name things in her community that concern her or that she struggles with. For example, Danielle is concerned that her community is too apathetic. She points to their apathy as more pressing than any one particular issue like crime or violence, she states:

When I look around my community and my school I feel like we're too laid back and I see it in myself because I presently feel like I want to change the world but I feel like I don't have all the tools yet and I'm ... like furthering my education, like when I'm finished with my education then I'll have all the tools that I need. So, I still feel like I'm in the wings based on the process of getting all the tools but I still don't feel right just waiting and I feel like the environment I'm in is kind of like this waiting stage like they are all waiting for something; my community ... it's ... not really a community where you can gung ho go out and do community service and ... change something. It's more like we're going to stay in our home and if we each individually ... make our little homes better then it will work out better. But I don't feel like that. I don't feel like that's how it's going to work. I feel like we all have to come together ... [but] we're all trying to make ourselves better, we're not really worried about too many other people. ... [and] that's hard for me.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Danielle's Interview Transcript, p.6, lines 216-244.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 7, line 291.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

When pushed to reflect further, Danielle talks about how she responds to this concern. Here again she expresses a complex response of both hopelessness and agency—stating that she talks to friends, but she still feels hopeless at times in the face of these issues:

I kind of get this sense of hopelessness like what am I [doing or] – I don't know what to do. Like I'm saying I'm in this community and it's not like there is a stall you can walk up to that they have planted out on the sidewalk like "send money to Darfur." So it's like I feel like I don't know what to do and I feel hopeless like what is the point of being here if I can't help anyone and I guess talking to [my friends] helps me remember that I can do something and maybe I'm not in the right position now but I will be and so that makes me feel better and usually we talk about [global issues] in class so I get different viewpoints and I mean it's like ...when I hear other people's hope I take from that and I bring it to me and like [I] send it back out.¹⁰⁹

Danielle's interview points to her search for hope and strategies to respond constructively to all that she is concerned about. Danielle's narrative also exemplifies the ways that she is a young person with a vision for how her community should unite and affect change, but who also feels constrained by the expectation that she has to wait until she becomes older or finishes her education to make a difference. Danielle is further constrained by her communal environment that focuses on individual achievement and development. In spite of feeling frustrated about the supports that are available in her community; Danielle still affirms that she feels "called" by God to do something, and she has a plan for later, after she gets her education.¹¹⁰ However, the question remains of what should she or can she do now – as a young religious person.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 10, lines 416-424

¹¹⁰ I return to Danielle's narrative and sense of calling below in the discussion of youth communal involvement. See also Danielle's Interview Transcript, p. 10.

Collective Themes

In addition to the individual narratives and experiences of these five African American youth, the interviews include reflections of three other youth and the surveys include the reflections of fourteen youth. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to their reflections and attempt to illumine the collective responses of these youth regarding their communal concerns, experiences of church, understandings of God working in their lives and the world, and their agency or communal involvement. In this section, I also look more closely at the individual “fragments” of the youth narratives.

Communal Concerns

Concerns about their Hometowns

In describing their hometowns, schools, and primary group of friends, the youth named an array of concerns. For example in the survey questions about their hometowns 75% of the youth named homicide, violence or crime as an issue of concern.¹¹¹ Over 40% talked about divisions among different groups (racial, ethnic or religious groups); included in that number, 25% of the youth named concerns about racism. Their discussions of racism pointed to examples of “white flight” from the public schools and the failure of their communities to welcome newcomers, particularly Hispanic immigrants. Depending on the specifics of their communities, youth also named concerns

¹¹¹ I did not include the responses of young people who simply wrote that some of the young people were “into the hip-hop/gang scene” or “People there are really into hip-hop...but kind of a problem because a ‘gansta’ mentality develops and makes things dangerous for a lot of youth...” because I was not sure if that could be classified as a concern about youth violence or crime. If I included these two statements as well, the percentage of African American youth who named crime, violence, gangs or homicide as a communal concern would increase to 83%.

about the economy, the relocation of victims of natural disasters, overcrowding, poverty, STDs, and the failure of religious communities.¹¹²

Also of note, a few youth (16%) include in their descriptions of their communities the innumerable churches located there; however, the youth did not describe the myriad churches as enhancing their communities. For example, one young woman noted that she was concerned about her community's violence and crime and she saw it as a direct reflection of the many communities of faith's "failure to fully unite and expand our Spiritual movement." While it is impossible to fully define her understanding of "expanding" a spiritual movement, from her survey response, she indicates that she sees misplaced priorities in the religious communities in her area:

There is literally a church on every corner ... However because of our failure to fully unite and expand our Spiritual movement, there has been sadly a lot of violence and crime. I have heard many say that there seems to be some type of "hold back" ... for growing ministries. This may be due to the idea of success being 100,000,000,000 and something members. When really success is spiritual promotion and empowerment from God.¹¹³

¹¹² In this section, I am only reporting the survey data of African American youth. These numbers are slightly different from the numbers for the overall YTI sample surveyed. In the total survey population, in questions about their hometowns 35% of the youth named violence or gangs as an issue of concern, 25% talked about different groups (races, classes, ethnic or religious groups) as being divided or segregated, 16 % named concerns about Racism. And depending on the specifics of their communities, youth also named concerns about illegal immigration, poor educational systems, environmental justice, the ravages of natural disasters, poverty, STDs, and teenage pregnancy.

It is very important to note the difference between the sample of African American youth and the larger sample concern youth violence. 75 % of African American youth list violence as a concern, while only 35% of the larger sample list violence as a concern. One can only begin to speculate about the causes of this difference (whether it is related to actual incidences and exposure to violence or to wider perceptions of violence among Black youth).

¹¹³ See Appendix C: Summary of Youth Survey Responses, for a fuller account of all the responses to perceptions and concerns about their hometowns. Please note that her quote is complete except for the deletion of her city name and other demographic data that could possibly link back to the respondent.

Concerns about School

Similarly, when writing about their schools, the survey participants described many positive aspects of their schools. One student was proud that her school was ranked in the top 5% in a *Newsweek* article and another student wrote about his level of enjoyment at school and the many caring teachers in his school. However, in describing their concerns for their schools – again the youth expressed exposure to myriad problems in their schools. Over 40% expressed concern about the violence and fighting in their schools. Another third of the youth named racism and race-based cliques as a major problem in their schools, with one student noting the changes that “increasing diversity” brought in her school, and another student noting the underrepresentation of minority students in A.P. or honors classes.

Over 16% of the youth described their schools as failing, or were aware that their school boards had labeled their school as such. These same youth described being worried about the negative perceptions of their schools because they were predominately black and lower income schools; alongside this concern they named a fear that many of their classmates had internalized the negative stereotypes about them and their schools.

While it was not a recurring theme, it is also important to note that one student surveyed named the problem of teachers sexually abusing students in her school.

Also looking at the interview data, the youth were able to go into more detail regarding their opinions and concerns about their schools. As noted in their individual narratives, both Kira and Marissa experienced schools that did not always provide the supports they sought or needed. For example, Kira turned to her school community and her principal in particular, to help address the onslaught of youth violence and homicides

in her community. However, instead of finding a community of support for grieving students, she encountered a school principal who gave an insufficient response to the students' tremendous grief and a principal who, in Kira's opinion, was more concerned with downplaying the possibility of negative publicity around the gun violence and shooting deaths of her students.¹¹⁴ Marissa also encountered racism and prejudices in her school that limited the types of relationships students of color could have with their teachers.

Primary Group of Friends

Unlike their discussions of their communities and schools, the youth were overwhelmingly positive in describing their friends and did not name many issues or concerns with their primary group of friends. However, their responses also illuminated some of their processes of making friends and some of the challenges they face in determining who their authentic friends are. For example three youth wrote that they were very selective of their friends—some named that they were only friends with people who “have a personal relationship with God” or that “most of their close friends are also their church family.” Other students noted that they were most often friends with people on their sports teams or in the band; while one student explicitly named that his closest friends were the ones from his public middle school, because “the rich private school kids are weird and fake so I keep the friends I know have got my back.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ See my discussion of Kira's personal narrative above for a fuller treatment of her narrative and for the full quote. Also see her interview transcript, p 20-21.

¹¹⁵ See Appendix C for full survey summary.

Experiences of Church

The youth articulated a significant interest in their religious communities, with over 64% selecting that they were regularly or very involved in a faith community. Over one third of the youth were regularly involved and almost 29% said that they were very involved in church. The other 36% stated that they were occasionally involved in a religious community, with no students responding that they were not involved in a church or religious community.¹¹⁶

For most of the youth, their involvement in church also related to practices with their family: Several youth wrote about experiences when they were growing up of their parents “forcing” them to go to church. Other youth also noted the influence of a particular family member, that was either a clergy person or simply very significant, in taking the young person to church. For example, in their interviews, Jackie recounted memories of going to church with her grandfather, who is a pastor and Kira spoke of the ways that she interacted with her mother, who is also her pastor. Additionally, Charles, a young man from Northern Virginia, described in detail how his family served as a key link for his involvement in church:

So my grandparents and my older family members they were really into church, like everybody was into church and the family history was like 70+ years, everybody [was] close knit. So we have a church in [...] North Carolina, [it is a] Baptist Church, and that’s where I grew up with my uncle Charlie, who died in my fifth grade year, and he basically established all the kids [in Christianity], “you gotta read the [bible], you

¹¹⁶ These responses among youth of African American descent for YTI 2008 is somewhat surprising for me, in that I expected their level of religious involvement to be on par with or above the overall average (including all ethnic groups); however the overall survey sample showed that 80% of all the youth were either regularly or very involved in their religious communities. (This difference may point to an actual trend among this group of youth or it may point to a difference in definition of regular involvement in religious communities). I admit that the group of African/African American youth at YTI during 2008 representing a greater diversity of religious affiliations than previous years. (see 2006, 2005 surveys for actual figures).

gotta have the bible in your life, bible study every day.” I grew up on bible study every day until fourth grade. I did youth ministry. We did the choir...everything. So, I grew up with that a lot and I had it down pact. My mom and dad had me down pact of the 10 Commandments, etc., etc.¹¹⁷

Charles’ interview also points to the way that changes in family structure and influences impacts the lives of the young people. For example, he also states:

And after my uncle died I think that’s when I just was like I don’t believe in this, I don’t believe this anymore and it just all went downhill from that. So he basically, my great-uncle, he basically just established my whole faith, beliefs, and everything else with it...¹¹⁸

While he discusses his process of becoming involved in church community again, he is clear that his family members and structure played a significant role in his early involvement.

Danielle also relays that ways that church for her, while not an extension of her family of origin, serves as another family and kinship group:

[My church] is small and it’s predominantly African American and a lot of them have West Indian descent. ... and we’re located in [a city] which is a predominantly African American area so we definitely have that impact but it’s like we are like a family. It’s like I have at least three ... moms other than my mom and grandma there. And so it’s like we’re really close...¹¹⁹

However, church as family is not the only image relayed by the youth. For example, Marissa’s experience of her church does not invoke images of family; instead she describes her church as being laid-back, non-vocal, and full of older people. Even her description of her church includes only the logistics of the service and not the warmth of the people. She states, “You walk in and you’ll sing a couple of hymns, you’ll hear the sermon, do offering and it’s all just smooth sailing. There is nothing in particular that

¹¹⁷ Charles’ Interview Transcript, p 2

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Danielle’s Interview Transcript, pp. 6-7, lines 270-275.

makes it any [more] special than any other church, it's just there for you to worship."¹²⁰ Marissa describes her experience in church in a very dispassionate manner. Muwasi, a young African, Roman catholic, offers a similar description of her experience of church. While she notes that she does not attend her church very often, she says that those who attend regularly are "the elderly so there's not that much to do there as far as youth activities."¹²¹

Thus in looking at the experiences of these youth in church, two trends emerge: (1) youth either saw church as an extension of their family life, where they felt forced and/or fully integrated into the culture of going to church and the life of the church *or* (2) youth felt that their churches were not really oriented towards them. The latter was reflected in Muwasi noting that there were not many youth activities and Marissa asserting that her church pretends to want youth, but does not welcome youth or allow them to utilize their gifts.

God's Activity in Personal Lives, Community, Government and World

Experiencing the Presence of God in their lives

While some youth struggled to articulate the core of their Christianity or the essential teachings of their church [answering I'm not sure or I don't know]; most of the young people surveyed and interviewed were very clear in their understandings of how God was working in their individual lives.¹²² For example, looking at the survey data, when asked to describe a time when they felt the presence of God in their lives, 86%

¹²⁰ Marissa's Interview Transcript, p. 7, lines 309-314

¹²¹ Muwasi's Interview Transcript, p. 6, lines 243-245

¹²² And this is very different from the experiences of youth regarding the church's influence in their lives.

chose to answer the question. And all of those who answered the question gave an account of a time when they felt the presence of God or described their practices of “getting into” the presence of God. In other words, 100% of the African American youth respondents and the overwhelming majority of the youth surveyed were able to name an experience of God’s presence in their lives.¹²³

The youth described experiencing the presence of God in their lives when they were having family issues (25%), when they were in a worship service or during particular religious events (such as baptism), and when God “blessed them” or did something for them.¹²⁴ The majority of the young people equated feeling the presence of God with God doing something for them (over 41% named an experience of God related to God doing something for them). While one young person named a material blessing, such as God blessing her to get a deal with a company, the other responses ranged from God blessing them on a test, to God granting them their desired outcome in a custodial battle, and God comforting them when they were lonely and felt like running away, to God blessing them to survive a car accident.

However, other youth (two of the twelve survey respondents) wrote of experiencing God multiple times, as if experiencing the presence of God was an everyday occurrence for them. In particular, one young woman wrote: “Anytime I significantly clear my mind of most worldly things and focus on God I can often feel his presence surrounding me.”

¹²³ It is important to note that this was true both for the sample of African American youth and the entire YTI community. In the larger community, however, there was one young man, a self proclaimed agnostic, who wrote that it was easier for him to think of a time when he hadn’t experienced the presence of God, rather than a time when he had. He was the only one who responded in the negative of the 37 total youth who answered the question.

¹²⁴ See Appendix C for the full survey summary for the African American youth.

God's work in the world and politics

On the other hand, moving beyond their discussions of God working in their individual lives, the vast majority of young people surveyed and interviewed were less certain about God's role or work in their communities, the world, or government. For example most youth were vague or ambiguous in their responses to questions such as "what does your church see as God's work in the world?" Some youth replied with statements as "God wanted them to be light in darkness,"¹²⁵ others spoke more generally about "helping others." These responses also were typically peppered with the phrases: "I don't know" or "I guess."¹²⁶

The responses became more complex, but even more uncertain when the youth described how they saw God working in the government or politics.¹²⁷ I include four typical responses here. First, Jackie responded:

Politics, I don't pay attention to politics so I really wouldn't know. I don't think so. Well, I mean I think He [God] might try but I think politicians for – some of them are harder to reach, like your little communication with God gets farther as you push Him away. So I think those politicians, a lot of them really have their minds set on what they want so it's harder for them to communicate with God than it is for people who are actually going through a struggle and going through stuff like that.¹²⁸

While not arguing that politicians have a harder time connecting with or hearing God, Marissa also asserts that she is on the fence about whether God is involved with politics. She describes her dilemma looking at the lives and actions of politicians who are also Christian. She responded saying:

¹²⁵ See Marissa's interview transcript, line 350.

¹²⁶ Ibid, line 344., See also Jackie's Interview Transcript, p. 7

¹²⁷ It would also have been helpful to ask how they felt God calling them or prodding them to work in government or politics.

¹²⁸ Jackie Interview Transcript, p. 12, lines 523-529.

I don't know if I see Him [God] working in my community. I don't know if he's in the government. It's really obnoxious because our forefathers were all Christian and they created this country or the Pledge of Allegiance wouldn't have under God in it or our dollar bills wouldn't say In God We Trust and its really, really sad because George Bush is a Christian, at least that's what he claims and he has people fighting in a war that we don't even know what we're fighting over any more. [She goes on to give her indictment of who's to blame in the war and concludes...] I think [God's] in the government, but I don't think people want to realize that He's there and take His full judgment so I think He's there but I don't think that people fully recognize that He is because then there wouldn't be so many unjust situations and I think that the people don't think God's there. Our society does not think that God is in the government because of the Sean Bell case, or simple cases where people have been shot and killed by the police and there is nothing you can do about it. I think that people give up that God is there and that's probably why I'm on the fence whether He is there or not. I think the He is but people don't pay attention.¹²⁹

Similarly, Elliot describes the problematic ways that religion shows up in U.S. politics and government. He states:

As far as government ... We're a predominantly Christian country. However, a lot of times I feel that they [the government] use their religion to... try to act like there's no other religion in the country... You see that a lot with different things that they do towards... different demographics and things, like with the stories about Guantanamo Bay, people get taken to Guantanamo Bay just because they're Islamic... and so it's like, you know, you see - you see [religion] working [in government], but at the same time you question some of the things that they do [such] as how they justify certain things. With religion, even back into different religious battles of yesteryear ... you see it and you're just like can we really justify something like murder and genocide and things with religion? So it's hard to say whether you see it ... in government, because government can be so corrupt and they can try to base their views and their actions off of religion. But you know that like a lot of it is just ego and wanting to maintain power and things like that, so personally speaking I can't necessarily say that I see ... God in every single action that we take as a country or even any government. Because a lot of it is just ego and wanting to be big dog. . . in the government in any country.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Marissa's Interview Transcript, lines 583-603.

¹³⁰ Ibid, pp 34-35, lines 1143-1178.

However Kira moves beyond the particular actions of politicians and casts the discussion in terms of a larger plan at work in the world. While not explicitly blaming God for the actions of political leaders, Kira expresses an understanding of political events as connected with the fulfillment of divine prophecies and as consequences of sin. Kira responds:

I feel like God is allowing things to happen in politics ... I feel like things, all things are being set in order. I feel like God allowed that – you know, because ...divine prophecies are going to have to be fulfilled. ... He's setting things in order to prepare for His Son to come again. I feel like ... because of sin there will always be tragedy. But I feel like, yes, He is working and He's just setting the table. In the whole world, I think He is just setting the table up, and He's doing something big.¹³¹

The youth responses represent an array of perspectives, but point toward a general understanding of a historical connection between Christianity and U.S. government *and* a sense of hypocrisy or inconsistency among political leaders and governmental structures. These observations fuel the youth's complex understandings and uncertainty about God's work in government. This complexity, confusion, and uncertainty about God's (and their religious community's) role in their communities and government is not necessarily surprising, or even problematic, for scholars of religion continue to research and explore the role that religion should or should not play in public life.¹³² Thus the youth responses parallel the complexities and tension in our larger society about God's work in the world, government or politics.

¹³¹ Kira Interview Transcript, lines 850-862

¹³² Amazon.com alone brought up an amazing 7,670 books and articles related to this discussion. Also in Chapter 5, I further explore some of the possible causes within the experiences of youth, as well as the larger society that lead to, if not the fragmentation of lives, the separation of spheres of our lives, such as public and private, religion from the public sphere, etc.

Youth Communal Involvement

Contrary to the myths that portray adolescents as apathetic or overly complacent, all of the youth surveyed and interviewed through YTI, in addition to naming things they were concerned about, participated in community service and other forms of communal involvement. Of course, some students noted going to schools that required a certain number of hours of community service. However, even with this requirement many youth named doing many hours of service beyond the requisite hours. Also the majority of youth spoke of being involved in community service as a matter of fact—as if their involvement was normal or what all young people were doing.

In the survey we also asked youth to check the types of activities they were currently involved with in their communities. We offered a range of activities from serving in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, to peer education around sex or tobacco use, to tutoring, and picking up trash. We tried to offer a range of activities including those classified as community service, as well as civic engagement activities – such as writing letters to politicians, registering voters, poll watching, and participating in town hall meetings or mock governments.

The most popular activity was recycling with almost 60% of the youth recycling or pushing their families to recycle. The next popular was peer tutoring, 53%, and volunteering at a Homeless Shelter or Soup Kitchen, 46%. However, we noted that much smaller percentages of youth were involved in civic or political issues. For example,

- Less than 8% of the youth (or only one) worked to register voters,
- Only one youth had signed a petition or letter addressing a communal concern,
and

- Only one youth had ever written a letter or called an elected official regarding a communal concern.¹³³

Youth also had an option of writing in other ways that they were involved in their community. While our research list did not include Church based youth groups, about 17% of the youth wrote in this activity—pointing to both the significance of the groups for the youth and to the ways that they view Church based youth groups as a significant part of their community involvement.

In addition to responding about their individual community activities, the survey asked youth to think about the “ways that young people are making a difference in their communities.” This question attempted to go beyond a posture of doing community service to make a connection to youth working for change or actually impacting their communities. Again, eleven of the fourteen youth surveyed responded to this question – pointing to the fact that almost 80% of the youth surveyed believe that young people can and are making a difference in their communities. While a few responses talked generically about what youth *could* do (over half of the youth named that youth could volunteer or do community service), others gave specific examples of organizations in their communities that youth were involved with. The youth pointed to particular ways that young people work in their communities; for example one youth wrote “Young people in my community really know how to get everyone pumped up and involved in what they stand for. They help raise money, help the elderly, and are doing a habitat for

¹³³ When compared to the larger YTI sample, we see a few differences. For example, the most popular activities remained recycling with 2/3rds of the youth recycling or pushing their families to recycle. But the next popular among the larger community was peer tutoring, at 48 %. We however noted similar trends in that much smaller percentages of youth were involved in civic or political issues. For example, here also

- Less than 10% of the youth worked to register voters.
- A little over 20% had signed a petition or letter addressing a communal concern
- Only 7% had ever written a letter or called an elected official regarding a communal concern
- And 1 young person was a volunteer in a presidential campaign.

humanity type thing soon.” Also because the question solicited open ended responses, it allowed youth to introduce ways of making a difference that were beyond what I initially imagined when I crafted the question. In particular one young person wrote that youth make a difference in their community by participating in the programs like YTI, where they come together, learn about diversity, and return to their home communities with strategies for making their communities better.¹³⁴

Motivations to Work or Act in Their Communities

In addition to asking the youth to name the types of activities they were currently doing, the survey was also designed to unearth what motivated the youth to work in their communities and to better understand the types of change and leaders youth admired for working in their communities. For example, we also asked the youth if they had ever learned of a “problem in the world” that prompted them to change something about how they lived. Almost 62% of the youth responded affirmatively. Youth named issues such as sex trafficking, genocide in Darfur, raising money to cure little known illnesses and AIDS, responding to animal cruelty by becoming vegan, and being motivated by their experience of salvation¹³⁵ or watching the lives of others who haven’t lived into their gifts. And even though each of the issues they raised was unique, with only two youth naming the same issue – their responses to this question reveals that youth are both concerned about things that are going on in the world around them and are motivated to

¹³⁴ See Appendix C for the full survey summary for the African American youth.

¹³⁵ In referring to her experience of “salvation,” the young woman is describing a Christian conversion experience in response to the doctrine of atonement, where she is “saved” from sin and death because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, dying on the cross and being resurrected, and where upon she feels/felt compelled to live in a different way in response to “Jesus saving her.” The young woman writes: “Well, when I received salvation and discovered the right way of living it encouraged me to change and to inform others.”

change and encourage others to change in response to things which are of concern to them.

Youth also responded to questions about both people they admired for making a difference in the world and people they knew personally who were making a difference in the world. The response rates for both questions were high, with thirteen of fourteen youth (or 92%) naming someone they admired and ten of fourteen youth (71%) naming someone they knew personally who was making a difference in the world. Youth demonstrated a range in the types of people they admired and their rationales. Youth named parents or a family member most often as someone they admired for making a difference in the world (31%); youth also said they admired celebrities for their humanitarian work around the world (23%) and pastors (15%). Also one student each said that they admired a particular teacher, politician and world leader. However, when we asked about people they actually knew, half of the youth named a pastor and others named friends (20%), a community worker (20%), and one young woman named herself.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ I was somewhat surprised by the number of youth who in an open ended response wrote that they admired a pastor who was making a difference in the world. My initial hunch was that youth would name more celebrities or world leaders; thus I included a question explicitly on clergy and church leaders making a difference in the world. The results to this question remained consistent with who the youth named they knew or admired. 69 % of the youth stated that they had seen a clergy person or church leader make a difference in the world. Their examples of how clergy were making a difference included:

- just by going to the nursing homes
- My Pastor offers free GED training for those in the community who desire to further their education.
- Many people in my congregation strive to be world changers. For instance, one of the members which so happens to be my best friend started a ministry with broadcast and film which helps to incline people spiritually and uplift them.
- The person of my congregation who has made a difference is my pastor. He travels around the world and talks to other congregations to preach the word of God.
- My pastor speaks to kids in prison; it definitely reminds me of the guy that inspired Malcolm X to cross over to the nation of Islam.
- My grandfather helped people whenever he could before he passed in 2005.

We also asked youth to discuss if there were barriers or supports to the ways that youth can become involved in the community. When discussing barriers to youth community involvement, five of the twelve youth respondents (42%) were very optimistic, asserting that there were no barriers that limited youth. Youth drew upon scriptural references of “we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us”¹³⁷ and gave examples of how youth were involved in various ways:

In my Faith Community there are no barriers other than your own self. If we are led by God we are able to give sermon, prophesy, or operate in the gifts of God. Most people are aware that God can speak through even the mouth of babes.

As the generations go on more and more people are making a difference and have their lives all planned out or have completed [many] of their goals and haven't even reached 20 yet, I know I have.¹³⁸

The rest of the youth were less optimistic; they offered pragmatic responses that youth are often limited by age, finances needed to execute their plans, and their dependency on parents for transportation. Only one respondent named that youth are limited in their communal involvement by their own lack of knowledge or fear of voicing their opinion.

On the other hand, in discussing the supports available to youth, all of the youth who answered the questions offered a concrete example of supports in their community. Youth named community organizations (50%), churches (42%), and schools (25%) as supporting their community involvement. Absent from the list was an explicit mention of

-
- She personally sets aside a certain percentage of her income to give to charity that helps families in our community.
 - by setting a example in giving to others and in tithes and offering--giving until they were broke

¹³⁷ An allusion to Philippians 4:13

¹³⁸ See Appendix C for full summary of African American youth survey responses.

the ways that parents encourage their youth; whereas youth were clear that parental support (finances or transportation) can hinder their progress if it is absent.

God's Calling to Work for Change

Along with our discussions of practical motivations, supports, and barriers to youth involvement in their communities, in the interviews we also asked the youth if they “felt called” by God or their church to work for change or make a difference in their communities. Most of the young people interviewed resonated with the language of “God calling them” to work for some kind of change or to respond to some of the concerns they named. As noted earlier, Kira named a sense of calling to respond to the youth violence in her school, because she was a Christian and she wanted her classmates to recognize that there was more to life than violence. Both Danielle and Jackie stated that they not only felt called by God, but went further to discuss that they were drawn to a particular profession in response to what they saw going on in their communities. Danielle expressed frustration with her own community because it was not as open to working for change as she wanted it to be. However, Danielle named feeling called by God to respond and to become a lawyer:

Do you have a sense that God is calling you to work for change?
Yeah. My personal battle like – is like *why I'm doing law and I want to represent rape victims* because I don't know, that whole process, yes there are people that help them but I don't think when it comes to the law, they don't give them emotional support and I think if you can mix it altogether, emotional, legal and just having someone to talk to I think a lot more people would actually want to report because it's really impersonal. ...¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Danielle's Interview Transcript, p. 10

Jackie also connected her career path with a desire to help people and what she saw as a calling. In response to the question, “do you feel a particular calling to respond to some of the social concerns that you see in the lives of other teenagers?” She stated:

I like to listen to people like about their problems and stuff. My best friend [...] has this one friend who cuts her arms. I don't know her that well so I can't just go up and ask her. But I want to get to know her just to know what could she possibly be going through. Because she's the happiest person – like when you meet her, she's just so excited and always jumping around. So I wonder what could she be going through to make her do that. And then she doesn't like to hide it at all. It's just out there, like you can see it. So I don't know if it's an attention thing. **I want to be a psychologist when I get older. So when I see stuff like this, I really think I want to help her.** I want to make it better, at least make it a little better to where it can be and stuff like that.¹⁴⁰

However, when asked if she felt that becoming a psychologist was explicitly a calling by God, Jackie noted a familiar association between being called by God and the pastorate (like her grandfather). Jackie stated that at one point she felt that she was called to be a pastor, but she now feels that she can combine religion and psychology.¹⁴¹

It is also important to note some major differences between the way that Kira, Danielle and Jackie respond to the idea of “calling.” Jackie and Danielle relate calling to a vocation or occupation, and see it as something that they will respond to in the future. Kira sees her calling as something that comes with being a “Christian” and thus she feels the need to respond right now. Kira also names her work with the Bible study and witnessing at school as meeting this urgent need to get her classmates “saved” or to see that there is more to life than violence. Thus, while Jackie and Danielle are attempting to

¹⁴⁰ Jackie's Interview Transcript, p. 10

¹⁴¹ See Jackie's Interview Transcript, p. 11,

Q: And do you think that God is calling to work for change?

A: At one point I did. I forgot when. I mean ... at one point I felt like I should become a pastor or something like that. I forgot why. I forgot how it happened. But I really did feel like it to the point that if my grandpa is a pastor, and so I was like, oh, it must be in my blood. But then I've decided to become a psychologist. And I figured I could work – you can do psychology with religion in it. And so I figured I can work both of them together to help people.

put off their response until their future careers, Kira is attempting to make an immediate response for the futures of her classmates. Both responses are admirable, but seem limited in the ways that they are responding to the conditions in their communities.

In contrast, Marissa did not explicitly connect her vocational goals with the concerns she saw in her community. She instead used “wishful thinking” language, noting the difficulty and trends of not responding in her hometown. She stated:

living in [her hometown], we are very one sided. We are just very like “I’m sorry, I can’t do anything about it.” Like if you’re poor, then I’m sorry and there’s not much you can do about it. But I work in the Bronx and seeing so many people with Medicaid and gentrification and it sucks and *hopefully if I ever get to that point where I have enough money to help other people, I hope I can use it to the best of my ability and just make more resources for other people like the same resources I’ve had.*¹⁴²

Marissa was more pessimistic¹⁴³ about feeling called and revealed her opinion about her church and school’s role in helping her understand a calling to work for change:

Q: Do you sense God, through church or family, friends or school calling you to work for change?

A: No. I don’t see that in my church or my school or any of that. It’s a personal option for me and I think that just being in areas or affiliating with certain people have really opened my eyes and that’s why I choose to help other people.¹⁴⁴

Elliot’s response is quite similar to Marissa’s. As noted above, Elliot, while he is not pessimistic, is uncertain about his catalyst to work for change; he states that “I don’t know where it comes from. It’s - it’s - it’s just - it’s just there.”¹⁴⁵ Thus, he neither

¹⁴² Marissa Interview Transcript, p. 12, lines 517-523.

¹⁴³ I characterize her statement as pessimistic because she relays the ways that her community is reluctant to get involved or see the ways that they can respond to the suffering around her. However, I also note that other youth interviewed were less inclined to talk about or didn’t resonate at all with the idea of being called to respond. For example, Muwasi responded that she didn’t think it was her concern to respond to the crisis and social concerns of other youth or in the world.

¹⁴⁴ See Marissa Interview Transcript, p. 12, lines 525-530.

¹⁴⁵ Elliot’s Interview Transcript, p. 33, line 1092.

ascribes nor denies an understanding of God or his church calling him to work for change – even as he insists that he must.

Connecting the Fragments

Looking collectively at their responses to the survey questions, we see that 100% of the young people named some issue in their schools, communities or core group of friends that they were concerned about and wanted to change, 100% of the youth, who responded, described a positive experience of God's presence in their lives, and 100% of the youth were involved in some way in their community.

While the young people were able to name concerns in their communities and were involved in their communities in many ways, it is important to note that most of the ways that the young people were involved in their communities did not address or relate directly to things that they were worried about. This disconnection could simply indicate that if youth are working on a problem then it was no longer a major concern to them. However, this disconnection may point to a larger problem among young people (and people in general) – that youth do not feel empowered to participate in ameliorating the things that are really concerning to them. The youth interviews and survey responses do not demonstrate a clear connection between these three dimensions of the young people's lives. The young people's concerns about their communities and their personal experiences of God do not translate into reflective and focused action in the world.

In other words, reviewing the youth interviews and surveys, we see examples of fragmentation in the lives of African American youth. The data reflect trends similar to those named by Parker in the 1990s, in that the youth have very clear and lively

understandings of God's active presence in their individual lives; however they are not certain of God's activity in their communities and particularly in political and governmental arenas. Their language also indicates fragmentation in terms of how youth understand themselves as agents of change. Thus, looking across the youth interview and survey data, I see indications of fragmented spirituality among the youth as well – in that despite their assertions about a transformative and active God and religious communities, youth are not currently acting in response to that which concerns them nor clearly indicating an expectation that God will work in the areas that concerns them.

However, the question of *why not* remains?¹⁴⁶ Why is their understanding of a personal experience with God, not fully connected to or integrated with their concerns about the community, their understanding of how God is working or should work in the world, and with the types of actions they are taking in the world? Below, I continue to explore this question looking at trends within current educational resources with African American youth and at trends in the larger society.

¹⁴⁶ An alternative question could also be why should these dimensions of the youth lives connect? Of course my original question presumes that I think they should—however, I remain aware of debates about the feasibility of integrated identities or even consistency in our lives and decisions.

Beyond the question of can we be consistent, the question remains of even if we do not hold every aspect of our lives/selves in tandem – can we at least develop the skills to draw on the resources in each arena. Particularly, I hope that the youth who are “on fire for God,” could use that same fire and energy and hope in God to address concerns in other areas of their lives.

Kira's narrative is really helpful and pushes me to think about what this looks like? For example, Kira is making things happen and is working for change in ways that most mainline youth are not (however, most mainline youth were also not quite as passionate about God either).

Chapter Four: From Sunday School to Sermons

African American Churches and Educational Ministry with Youth

In order to attend closely to the spirituality and spiritual formation of African American youth, I started with and gave priority to the voices and understanding of African American adolescents. However, in addition to listening to the voices of young people, it is necessary to understand and attend to the religious and educational contexts of their young lives. Therefore, in this chapter, I analyze current educational curricula in African American churches to explore what is emphasized in the spiritual development of African American adolescents. While noting that churches are only part of the spiritual landscape or influences on adolescent spirituality and spiritual formation, the Black church remains a significant source for many African American youth. The Black Church's complex history and persistent presence in the African American community makes it a critical community to examine in order to understand and redress the prevalence of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents.

Below, I analyze two major segments of educational ministry: Sunday school curriculum and sermon content; in order to understand the explicit and implicit "on the ground" theology of African American churches presented to African American adolescents. Even as I emphasize that African American churches are *not* monolithic, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to give an exhaustive account of the complexity among African American churches regarding theologies and educational pedagogy.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ See Kenneth Hill's *Religious Education in the African American Tradition* (Chalice Press, 2007), for one treatment of the variety of methods and emphasis in African American religious education. Hill's work also offers a typology for categorizing African American churches and does not attempt to give an exhaustive list of African American religious education.

Therefore, instead of *essentializing* all African American churches, I look at one example of quarterly Sunday school curriculum, *Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI)*, which is widely used among African American churches, and I analyze a sample of sermons from ten predominately African American churches.¹⁴⁸

I first present my analysis of the *UMI* curriculum and sermon content separately. By engaging each educational resource separately I am able to discuss the trends which are particular to each genre before looking at the collective trends in educational resources within African American churches. In this initial review of the individual resources I offer a brief rationale of the role that each resource plays in the history of African American Christianity. I then offer a detailed summative analysis of each resource, focusing on a set of guiding categories and questions:

1. **THEOLOGICAL THEMES:** What are the major topics or theological themes presented?
2. **PRACTICAL ISSUES:** What issues or practical situations are addressed? (eg. Is personal sin, sicknesses, wealth, or other personal, communal, or systemic/societal issues addressed?) Are issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexism, homelessness named or explored in the sermon/curriculum? Do the topics/themes presented include calls to personal piety or behavior? Communal action? Social justice? None? All?
3. **UNDERSTANDING OF GOD:** How is God described? What attributes are ascribed to God? How and where is God understood to act? What is God expected to do?
4. **CHANGE OUTLINED:** What types of change does the preacher/curriculum call for? (Personal? Communal? Systemic?) Is there a call to collective civic engagement or political action?
5. **HUMAN ACTION:** How are humans encouraged to respond or act in the world? (Charity? Good works? Prosperity? Advocacy? Justice-building?)
6. **ADOLESCENTS:** How are adolescents referred to in the sermons or curriculum? (Are they referenced or included? If so, how?)

Also we can look at the data on the variety of historically Black Denominations to attend to the diversity of thought and organization. For example, see the Pew Charitable Trust, Inc. classifications <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-appendix2.pdf>

¹⁴⁸ See below for a fuller description of the sermon sample. Also see Appendix D for a chart of the demographics (denominations, member size, location, etc.) of the churches in this sample.

7. RACE/ETHNICITY: Is there any reference to race or ethnicity in the sermon/curriculum? If so, how?
8. AFRICAN AMERICAN: How are African Americana discussed and described?
9. HOPES: What hopes are named for the community? The African American community? For the world?
10. EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT CURRICULUM: What conclusions might be drawn about what is being taught explicitly, implicitly, or by being ignored?

While there are many questions that one can raise in looking at educational resources, I chose these questions to serve as the basis of my aggregate analysis—helping me to focus on particular dimensions and name patterns within and across the curriculum and the sermons. The questions were also designed to help me to answer my primary research question of:

Why are African American Christian adolescents experiencing fragmentation in their spirituality? Why are they not connecting their belief in God with a call to work for change or even a hope that change in their communities can take place?

These questions open the door for us to assess whether the curriculum content, itself, is indicative of a fragmented spirituality, or at best the curriculum is one which prioritizes a singular dimension of spirituality or set of themes to the exclusion of others.¹⁴⁹

Sunday School Curriculum

Why Sunday School Curriculum?

While it could be simpler to conduct an analysis of the major theological documents or writings of key thinkers in the African American Christian traditions—African American Christianity is not as easily or simply traced back to one key thinker or

¹⁴⁹ During my analysis I came to see certain limitations to the questions I asked—noting at times that the types of questions I asked of the curriculum emphasized or demonstrated my personal and preconceived ideas of what makes for a good curriculum (e.g. I ask questions of action, or justice, etc.) However, analyzing each of the lessons also demonstrated the theological themes and ways of responding that are deemed important by UMI (and to see how their emphasis evolves over the course of the year and are sometimes limited by the biblical text or practical themes selected for the quarter).

set of written materials. Given the development of the African American church, its emphasis on an oral tradition, and the impact of the prohibition of literacy among enslaved Africans, explicitly theological writings and treaties of African American churches in many denominations do not exist or do not fully represent their theological and practical concerns.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, in order to move beyond the idea that the theological understanding of a group of people can only or primarily be found in the writings of one leader and in order to ascertain an understanding of African American Christian theology within its educational ministries, it seems more appropriate to analyze the most wide spread written *and* oral aspects of the tradition: Sunday school curriculum and sermons.

Long before the expansion of multimedia ministries and online Christian stores,¹⁵¹ each of the historically Black denominations organized publishing houses to print educational pamphlets and Sunday school curriculum. For example, if one traces the history of the many African American Baptist denominations, quickly one finds that the development of publishing houses or educational boards runs hand in hand with the growth and division of the many denominations. Looking in particular at one of the first national organizations of Black Baptist, the *National Baptist Convention of the United States of America* (NBC, Inc)¹⁵²— the group was successful from its formation in 1895

¹⁵⁰ This is also true because of the problematic nature of the theoretical term “Black Church” in that it represents a variety of movements among enslaved and freed Africans developing during the late 18th and 19th centuries in the U. S. And it would thus be easier to analyze the theological writings of key thinkers in a particular denomination (such as analyzing the theology of Richard Allen in the African Methodist Episcopal church).

¹⁵¹ I note the significance of religious multimedia and internet services, in that I have obtained many recorded sermons and manuscripts from leading African American pastors using these sites.

¹⁵² Jacqueline Trussell, “The Convention Movement of the Black Baptist Churches” From BlackandChristian.com, <http://www.blackandchristian.com/articles/academy/trussell1.shtml> (Accessed: May 20, 2009). She writes:

until 1915, when internal conflict arose around the National Baptist Publishing Board. The conflict focused on whether the publishing board was part of or separate from the Convention.¹⁵³ The result of the conflict was the incorporation of the Publishing Board, the forming of a separate Black Baptist convention, The *National Baptist Convention of*

In 1895, a meeting attended by more than 2000 clergy was held in Atlanta, Georgia. The three largest conventions of the day: the Baptist Foreign Missionary Convention, the American National Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Educational Convention merged to form the **National Baptist Convention of the United States of America**. This brought both northern and southern black Baptist churches together. Among the delegates was Rev. A.D. Williams, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church and grandfather of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

At the group's 1915 meeting in Chicago, internal problems arose. At issue was whether the National Baptist Publishing Board, the organization that printed nearly all of the Sunday school and Christian Education materials, was a part of the Convention or a separate entity, able to keep all of the monies received from the sale of Convention related materials. The Board, under the leadership of Rev. R. H. Boyd, had grown into a thriving enterprise. It sponsored the annual meeting of the National Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress. Boyd's decision to incorporate the Publishing Board caused a legal battle that culminated in a split from the National Baptist Convention, USA. On September 15, 1915, the **National Baptist Convention of America** was formed. The first president was the Rev. Edward P. Jones. The National Baptist Convention of America was often referred to as the "Boyd" Convention because of its support for the founder of the Publishing Board. It was, for several years, also called the "unincorporated" convention.

For more information on the interconnection of Publishing boards and Black Baptist denominational development see also Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptist*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1985) and James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power*. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004 [1986]).

¹⁵³ Jacqueline Trussell, "The Convention Movement of the Black Baptist Churches" From BlackandChristian.com, <http://www.blackandchristian.com/articles/academy/trussell1.shtml> (Accessed: May 20, 2009).

America (NBCA),¹⁵⁴ and the subsequent forming of another Black Baptist Publisher, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. Sunday School Publishing Board.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, in tracing the history of African American Methodists, religious educator Kenneth Hill notes the interconnection of the establishment of the denominations and a mission to provide education; both in terms of literacy to newly freed persons and explicit instruction in the Christian faith.¹⁵⁶ Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church in 1787, organized both a church and a school for the instruction of youth and adults in the faith, reading and writing. Similarly, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church also formed both a church and school in their first church building.¹⁵⁷

Across each of the historically African American denominations, Hill recounts the history of the organization, the formation of educational ministries and institutions of higher learning, and the formation of the publishing boards. For example, the African

¹⁵⁴ This organization continues to meet today. However, there were ongoing questions about the interconnection of the publishing house and the National Baptist Convention of America (unincorporated). In a manner, this conflict was only resolved when the R. H. Boyd Publishing changed its name and reestablished itself as a publisher for several Christian Denominations in 2006. See http://www.rhboydpublishing.com/our_company/history/index.php for a fuller history of the R. H. Boyd Publishing. However, it is important to note that this history is devoid of any mention of the conflicts surrounding the interactions between the Publishing Board and the various conventions.

Anecdotally, while noting the history and connections of the Boyd publishing to particular Baptist denominations, it is important to note that individual Black Baptist churches maintain the autonomy to purchase curriculum from whomever they want. Thus, in reviewing my own history and membership in a church connected with National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., I recall that we always used the Boyd hymnals and from time to time used the Boyd Sunday school curriculum and attended Sunday School Conventions and Baptist Training Unions, modeled after the earlier Boyd conferences.

¹⁵⁵ See website for history and fuller discussion of the development of the Sunday School Publishing Board (SSPB) in 1915, after a split over the governing of the Boyd Publishing Company (then named the National Baptist Publishing Board). <http://www.sspbnbc.com/3599398/359/>. Like the Boyd Publishing Company, the SSPB continues to produce Sunday school curriculum and educational resources for African American Baptists. However, the SSPB is a smaller organization and appears to supply less material (however, I could not confirm or find current data on the exact revenue and/or churches served by each).

¹⁵⁶ Hill, p. 18. He writes: “Although in many respects contemporary Sunday schools serve to reinforce the ideals, doctrines, and principles of Christianity, Sunday schools in the early Black church emerged primarily as a response to the lack of literacy in the Black community.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Methodist Episcopal Church established their publishing house in 1882 in conjunction with the founding of the Sunday School Union. Hill credits the founder of the AME Sunday School Union, Bishop Charles S. Smith, with setting a foundation for publishing in the denomination, by promoting “the idea of religious education through the publication of Sunday school material ... and utilized the publishing house as a very effective vehicle to educate a wider community.”¹⁵⁸ Likewise, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Sunday School Union began publishing curriculum in 1872, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church began in 1918, the Church of God in Christ in 1912, and as noted above the National Baptist Convention, USA Sunday School Board began publishing curriculum in 1897.¹⁵⁹ In recounting this history, Hill emphasizes the significance of the Sunday school movement and the subsequent publishing industry within the development of African American churches and denominations.

Given the interconnection between publishing houses, Sunday school curriculum, and the evolution of African American denominations, a comparison between the religious education resources of each denomination provides many useful insights. However, in my dissertation, I attempt to address the educational content and curriculum used *across* denominations with African American youth. Because of my desire to look across denominations, the many changes in the denominational publishing boards, as well as the ways that local churches maintain the ability to change and utilize non-denominationally based curriculum, I began to pay attention to the Sunday school curriculum currently utilized in the local churches with which I was affiliated. I found that in addition to certain denominationally based resources (like the Baptist Boyd

¹⁵⁸Hill, 21.

¹⁵⁹ Hill, 21-22.

Hymnal), the majority of these churches, across denominations, were using the *Urban Ministry, Inc.* Sunday school curriculum (UMI) for their youth Sunday school classes.¹⁶⁰

UMI, unlike the other curriculum and publishing boards, was *not* started as a denominationally based curriculum, neither has it been historically associated with a single African American denomination. Instead UMI was founded on the idea that there was a need, not only for literature published by African American people, but for literature that addresses the specific social and cultural needs of African American youth.¹⁶¹

Background and History of *Urban Ministry, Inc.*

Therefore while there is a variety of a Sunday school curriculum in use in African American Churches,¹⁶² I chose to examine the UMI Sunday school curriculum, because of the reach and popularity of UMI. Beyond my personal experience of the popularity of the UMI curriculum, according to their promotional materials, “Urban Ministries, Inc. is the largest independent, African American-owned and operated Christian media

¹⁶⁰ It is important to distinguish between youth Sunday school curriculum and adult Sunday school literature, because in several of the churches I observed, I noted that many of the churches had adopted alternative adult literature or had topical bible studies (designed at the church) for the adult members; however the majority had not developed youth Sunday school materials, but were utilizing the UMI curriculum for the children and youth lessons.

Further research is necessary to determine why this trend was present and to see how prevalent that trend is beyond the churches I observed. My initial impression is that adult students will often demand or have a say in the curriculum used in their classes and thus there tends to be more variety in that curriculum based on the demographics of the church. However, it is also my impression that because of the limited variety of well published culturally specific youth curriculum, most churches struggle to find appropriate youth and children curriculum, particularly one which reflects the theology and cultural relevance of African American churches.

¹⁶¹ It is significant to point out that the first product published by UMI in 1970 was the *InTeen* magazine, a Sunday school curriculum designed for and around the needs of African American teenagers—and the rest of the curriculum, across the age spectrum was developed years later.

¹⁶² As stated previously, the variety of curriculum used in Black churches is also partially due to the fact that most churches are free to choose which curriculum they want to use and are free to change at any time the Sunday school leaders, pastor, or curriculum board decides. There appears to be much local church autonomy given to the structure and content of religious education (even in denominations with rigid hierarchies in church leadership).

company.” Since its founding in 1970, UMI has served over 40,000 churches, including churches in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Africa.¹⁶³

UMI's history and formation also parallels the evolution of Christian Education within African American denominations during the mid-20th century. UMI's founding in the 1970s is part of the larger responses of Black churches to criticism that arose during the Civil Rights movements and in light of the Black Power movements. Kenneth Hill writes that “During the 1960s and 1970s, Black nationalists and theologians began to critique Black church education, especially Sunday school literature, for not being relevant to the Black community.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, responding to the energy within the nation, as well as the personal journey of the founder, UMI was founded with the particular mission of creating culturally relevant Sunday school resources.¹⁶⁵ The founder, Melvin E. Banks, felt “called” at the age of 12 to respond to a need for knowledge and educational resources in the African American community. Banks describes being approached by an elderly African American gentleman, after sharing his testimony in a church in Alabama. The elderly man quoted Hosea 4:6, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”, to him. Banks remembers that interaction as the beginning of his mission and dream to create resources which appeal to African Americans.¹⁶⁶

UMI continues to produce materials that cater to African American communities, for it sees an ongoing need for resources that demonstrate and display positive images of

¹⁶³ www.urbanministries.com, (accessed 4/7/09).

¹⁶⁴ Hill, 23. Much later, some of the larger, historically European American publishing companies also began to produce special divisions to appeal to the interest of African American Christians in response to many of the calls for culturally diverse and relevant curriculum.

¹⁶⁵ UMI's current mission statement is: “We are called of God to create, produce, and distribute quality educational products, to deliver exemplary customer service; and to provide quality Christian education services, which will empower God's people, especially within the Black community, to evangelize, disciple, and equip people for serving Christ, His kingdom, and church.” (www.urbanministries.com, accessed 12/29/2009).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

African Americans. The hallmark of the UMI curriculum is both the attempt to design lessons that connect with the historical, social and spiritual experiences of African Americans and the prevalence of African American images. Looking over each text and the website, one finds images of African American people and youth as well as images of Biblical characters with distinctively African American physical features (such as darker complexions, kinky and thicker hair textures, etc.).¹⁶⁷

Currently, UMI Sunday school curriculum teacher packets are also designed to include spotlights on African American history.¹⁶⁸ Each “Teaching for Success Kit” includes an overview of the weekly biblical passages and lessons for the quarter, but they also include a bulletin board and handout that features three figures in African American history. While these features and resources for teaching African American history are included in the Teaching for Success kits, these components are not included in the individual student magazines or workbooks, nor are they included in the teacher’s guide. In other words, if a church chooses only to purchase the student and teacher books and not the supplemental teaching resources – they can miss the components of the curriculum that explicitly and intentionally discuss African American history and heritage.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Similar strides, to include more Black imagery and iconography, were made by clergy such as Albert Cleage, when he installed a mural of a Black “Madonna and Child” in his Detroit church as he was pushing the church to respond to the social realities of the African American community and their struggles for freedom from oppression.

UMI’s website also includes references to the research produced during the 1950-70s regarding the significance of positive images of African Americans for the development of African American youth. In particular they reference the “doll experiments” conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark during the 1940s.

¹⁶⁸ I can only remark on the current layout and design of the teaching packets, as I was not able to review the archives of the UMI curriculum to see if they always included spotlights on African American heritage or how these historical figures were integrated into the curriculum. [I have observed the current structure/format of including spotlights on African American history in the teaching kits from the early 1990s to 2008].

¹⁶⁹ This can become problematic during the quarters when the theme does not lend itself to narratives that explore African American concerns or issues. For example, in one J.A.M curriculum, the

Methodology of Curriculum Review

My sample of Sunday school curriculum includes one hundred six (106) lessons from the *Urban Ministries, Inc.* (UMI) adolescent curriculum line. I reviewed fifty-three (53) lessons (or the equivalent of a little more than one year of lessons) from the *J.A.M.* (Jesus and Me) curriculum, that UMI designs and markets to youth ages 12-14, and the *InTeen* curriculum, which is marketed for youth ages 15-17. I chose to analyze both the *J.A.M.* and *InTeen* curriculum to gain a better sense of how UMI is attempting to educate both lower and middle adolescents. I did not include UMI's curriculum for young adults in my analysis; however it could illumine the educational curriculum geared towards the entire spectrum of adolescence, for lower (12-14), middle (15-18), and upper (19-25+) adolescence.¹⁷⁰ However, as noted in my interview analysis, in this dissertation I focus primarily on lower and middle adolescents (ages 13-19).

UMI curriculum follows the "International Uniform Lesson Series" – a series of biblical texts and themes set by an ecumenical and national committee. This series outlines a six year cycle of Sunday school lessons.¹⁷¹ Therefore, in order to get a sense of

quarterly theme was weather and even though the imagery was of African American youth – the curriculum did not have any particularly distinctive dimensions that called youth to think about their identity as African Americans. Also in this particular quarter, the lessons were decidedly focused on the individual and did very little to attend to the communal dimensions of the students lives and thus did not push them to think about the Genesis stories in terms of community and systems of injustice.

¹⁷⁰ It is important to note that these divisions in adolescence are somewhat arbitrary, but they attempt to speak to some of the nuances, different life experiences, and developmental challenges facing youth, even at different stages of what has been lumped together as "adolescence." For a fuller discussion of the periods or divisions of adolescence please see David Rahn in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*. (Zondervan, 2001). Also see Friedrich Schweitzer, *The Post modern Life Cycle*. (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2004), chapter 4, for a discussion of "post-adolescence" which includes young adults well into their thirties, who have not fully transitioned to the modernist notion of what it meant to be an adult (e.g. settled career and family life).

¹⁷¹ This system of uniform Sunday school lessons, beginning in the late 1800s, is utilized across a wide spectrum of Protestant denominations, both predominately European and African American. The Committee on Uniform Series is part of the National Council of Churches in the United States. The process enables churches to use a standard cycle of lessons and to have a common thread of biblical study across ages, regardless of the curriculum chosen for a particular age group. This cycle of lessons (like the lectionary calendar) also helps a church move through the majority of the Bible in a six year cycle.

the types of lessons, both the range of Biblical texts and the supplemental lesson development offered, I chose to review four quarters across two years. The 106 lessons come from the J.A.M. and InTeen Curriculum for Summer 2007, Fall 2007, Summer 2008, and Fall 2008. Each quarter includes 13-14 lessons dated for each Sunday in that three-month quarter. Each quarter is also designed around a particular theme that emphasizes a theological topic and/or practical area of knowledge or concern in the lives of young people.¹⁷²

Quarter	Curriculum	Theme	Theological Themes and Biblical Texts
Summer 2007	J.A.M.	“FINE PRINT” –African American literary publications	Justice Old Testament Prophets
	InTeen	“Doing It Right” – Obeying God and doing what is right.	
Fall 2007	J.A.M.	“Weather” -- Genesis Creations Stories	Creation/beginnings/Covenant/ Promises/Dreams/Visions/Family Genesis Narratives
	InTeen	“Sculpted by God”	
Summer 2008	J.A.M.	“I can see clearly now”	Images/Attributes of Christ, Gospels, Hebrews, James
	InTeen	“Images of Christ”	
Fall 2008	J.A.M	“Generation Christ”	Community, New Testament
	InTeen	“The New Community”	

My methodology for reviewing the UMI curriculum included reading through each lesson carefully and then answering the guiding questions, listed above, for each lesson. After the initial reading, I did a second reading of the notes and responses to my

The cycle for 2004-2010 utilizing a “new concept of biblical scope, organized around major themes such as: creation, call, covenant, community, and commitment.” (See Kenneth Hill, 20)

¹⁷² The cross section of themes and dates selected enabled me to look the way that the UMI curriculum, in both themes and design, is ever evolving. For example, from 2007 to 2008, the *InTeen* magazine format changed to include more glossy pages, like an actual magazine and not a newsletter (as it did in the past).

eleven guiding questions to see if there were any patterns or clustering of particular themes or topics addressed in the curriculum.¹⁷³

In order to facilitate my analysis and to offer a more succinct review of the curriculum, I used a random number generator to select a sub-sample of my larger curriculum sample of 106 lessons.¹⁷⁴ The subsample is not completely random, in that I chose to select four lessons from each quarter and each curriculum; and I chose to review the same four lesson numbers for each curriculum.¹⁷⁵ Thus I reduced my original data set from one hundred six lessons to thirty-two (32) lessons. In my statistical analysis I refer to percentages of my subsample of 32. However, in my discussion of particular qualitative characteristics of the curriculum, I also draw from the larger sample.¹⁷⁶

UMI Curriculum Findings

The general structure of the UMI lessons includes a biblical passage, a narrative describing a real life situation, a discussion of the biblical passage (that offers background and interpretation, connecting the text to the narrative), and a section for

¹⁷³In order to conduct a more methodical review of these 106 lessons, I designed a series of analysis worksheets that helped me look at the curriculum through the same set of lenses and to pose the same questions to each lesson. (See above for the guiding analysis questions and see appendix for sample analysis worksheet).

¹⁷⁴ I reviewed all 106 lessons before deciding to use a random subsample for my discussion of the findings. Conducting a qualitative analysis of one hundred six lessons proved to be quite unruly and determining patterns and trends became very cumbersome – leading to my decision to take a subsample of the one hundred six lessons. I also chose to select a random sub-sample of my sample of 106 lessons, because the Sunday school data is only a part of my dissertation data and is used for setting the baseline for my understanding of sources of fragmentation in African American adolescent spirituality.

¹⁷⁵ I used the random number generation function of excel to generate two list of random numbers between 1 and 13 (the number of lessons in each unit). The excel program returned the values 2, 5, 8, 11 (which I used for the *InTeen* curriculum quarters) and 1, 3, 6, 13 (which I used for the *J. A. M.*)

I chose to use different sets of values for each curriculum, in order to eliminate duplications in the biblical texts and possible theological themes, because *Inteen* and *Jam* are utilizing the same scripture lessons in each quarter. In this way the subsample is not completely random, but is a stratified sample. (**Stratified Sampling** refers to a method of sampling where the population is divided into two or more strata and each subpopulation is sampled, usually randomly).

¹⁷⁶ I will try to attend to any radical differences I note in any examples I lift up that were not included in the sample of 32, so that they will not appear to be outliers or radically different from the trends I note in the sub-sample.

students to apply or in some way respond to the lesson they have just reviewed. The application section typically includes a lesson comprehension activity, as well as a way to do more with the lesson throughout the week –with invitations to share their activities in the next class. Each of these components contributes to the overall theological and educational content of the lesson. Thus taking into consideration each of these components, in this section I summarize the themes, theological truths and actions contained within the UMI curriculum.

Theological and Practical Themes

The sample of UMI Sunday school curriculum addressed a wide range of theological and practical themes. In reviewing the introductory narratives and practical application sections of each lesson, I found that the UMI lessons most often addressed personal and interpersonal situations.¹⁷⁷ Eighty-four percent (or 27 of the 32 lessons) of the curriculum sub-sample addressed personal and interpersonal issues such as struggles with personal success, utilizing one's individual gifts, issues of romance and getting along with siblings, or spending time with parents. A much smaller percentage, 31%, addressed communal situations or even described youth working in their communities. The communal themes included sharing with those in need, talking with a homeless community member, and using the news and print media as a means of affecting communal issues, such as racism and bias.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Please see the Curriculum and Sermon Analysis Schema at the end of this chapter for an overview of my understanding of personal, interpersonal, communal and societal themes and actions. I have included this chart because of the myriad and often imprecise ways of defining each of the above terms.

¹⁷⁸ Please note that the percentages do not add up to 100% because some lessons included discussions of more than one issue. Thus a lesson could include calls for personal success in terms of starting a business or obtaining wealth and include discussions of how that business could be used to benefit a community of people.

In addition to thinking about the practical themes in terms of whether they address primarily individuals or communities, it was also informative to look at the context and locations of each of the practical narratives. For example, the majority of the narratives and practical situations were set at home (44%) and school (28%), while only 6% addressed or took place in larger community settings (such as on the street or in their neighborhood) and only 12.5% of the narratives were set at church.

Similarly, when I reviewed each lesson, asking the question of whether social justice issues were addressed, I found that overwhelmingly the curriculum did not include social justice issues in the discussions. Of the subsample, only three lessons included discussions of racism, two lessons included discussions of homelessness, and only one discussed sexism. It is also significant to note, that while the complexity of each narrative is limited to presenting accessible information for adolescents and by space constraints; the discussions of homelessness did not offer any type of social or systemic analysis of the issues. Instead the narratives focused on one individual showing compassion to a homeless person or a youth group serving homeless people, without ever questioning why or how homelessness exists in their communities. The discussions of racism were somewhat more complex, as I discuss later in this chapter.

This sample of the UMI curriculum, and its lack of engagement with social justice issues, parallels trends in Black Christian education during other historical periods. For example, Kenneth Hill describes a trend in the literature of African American churches in the early twentieth century; he describes it as “de-radicalization of Black church education”¹⁷⁹ and writes:

¹⁷⁹ Hill, 20.

When I sifted through samples of the Sunday school materials written in the twentieth century by African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and National Baptist Publishing Board, I discovered the literature failed to address social justice issues such as war, hunger, racism, and Black Power until the 1960s. Much of the Sunday school literature prior to the 1960s focused on knowledge of scripture, self-help, and a place of warmth and acceptance in which the love of God could be experienced.¹⁸⁰

Hill notes that within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, during the 1970s and early 1980s the Sunday school curriculum had an added emphasis on “Blackness” and he found that more than fifty lessons during the years of 1975-1985 dealt with issues of racism and prejudice.¹⁸¹ However, Hill’s research does not describe the trends in Sunday school literature after 1985 and thus leave opens the possibility of another wave of “de-radicalization” in Black Sunday school curriculum within the last 25 years.

Additionally, in looking at the theological themes in the curriculum, the lessons included themes ranging from the *promises* of God to the *images* of Christ. As noted above, each unit was organized around a theological and practical theme. Thus, the major theological themes of the lessons focused broadly on: Creation and Covenant, Community,¹⁸² Christ, and Righteousness (or Obedience to God). However, across each

¹⁸⁰ Hill, 20. This trend noted by Hill also connects with trends noted by Gayraud Wilmore in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism. 3rd edition.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 163-195.

¹⁸¹ Hill, 24. While Hill lifts up the fifty plus lessons over the ten year span that dealt explicitly with racism and prejudice, this is somewhat problematic for me in that that still amounts to 5 lessons per year. Similarly, it is not clear as to whether other justice issues are also addressed and how Black Christians were expected to respond to these discussions of religion and racism.

¹⁸² It is however, important to note that while the unit was explicitly or nominally about community, this theme did not present itself in every lesson (regardless of the scripture text being illumined in the lesson). For example, I reviewed 8 lessons that came from the units on community; however, my analysis only noted six lessons that had community (unity, conflict, new community, etc) as the central theological theme.

Similarly, I reviewed 8 lessons from units on of the Hebrew Bible Prophets, with scripture lessons that focused on communal indictments, judgment and calls to righteousness, justice, and obedience to God; however in reviewing the discussion and materials of the UMI editors, I found that only five lessons included justice (as in calls for justice and even questioning where the justice of God is) as a primary theological theme. The lessons instead focused on themes of personal responsibility and loyalty to God – in

individual lesson, the most popular theme included God's promises (6 of 32) as relayed in the *Genesis* narratives of the Hebrew Bible. In these texts, God's promises are exemplified in God establishing a covenant, showing favor, and providing for the people in specific ways to demonstrate God's fulfillment of promises.¹⁸³ However, the theme of God's promises was also lifted up in other units, particularly in the New Testament narratives, such as Matthew 5, where the UMI editors lifted up the Beatitudes, the teachings, and the promises of Jesus.

In addition to, and often related to the larger unit themes, the UMI editors lifted up several other popular theological themes. For example, a very popular theological theme across the lessons was God's concern for humanity and the significance of humanity to God; this was conveyed in the often repeated phrases of "God cares for us" and "We matter to God."¹⁸⁴ The editors of UMI emphasized this theme in the lessons about creation, indicating the importance of seeing oneself as created in the image of God. This theme was also explored in the lessons about the images and roles of Christ. The editors described the redemptive work of Christ as an act of God's concern for humanity and the work of Christ in empowering us to be "children of God."

The editors also emphasized the theme of faithfulness or "remaining faithful" across the units (this theme was central in 5 of the 32 lessons). The idea of "remaining faithful" encompasses a general focus in the lessons which encourage youth to see the value of their faith and the need to remain faithful in times of disappointment or

addition to discussions of the requirements of God and consequences of disobeying God (which are related to issues of social/communal justice, but the editors focused on the individual's role in these situations).

¹⁸³ In these lessons, there were discussions of the "elevation" or blessing of particular persons over others – for example, the narratives include the "favor" of Joseph over his other brothers in his Father's eyes--and the subsequent enslavement and elevation of Joseph in the Pharaoh's house.

¹⁸⁴ This theme was emphasized in 4 of the 32 lessons, in Inteen, Fall 2008, lesson 2; Inteen, Summer 2008, Lesson 2, Jam, Summer 2008, Lesson 3.

discouragement. Also included in this category are lessons with discussions of need to draw near to God and to persist in godly living.

Understandings of God and God's Action in the World

In this section I explore the numerous images, attributes, and actions of God emphasized in the curriculum—in particular, I look at the ways God is expected to act. Because the curriculum is biblically based and designed around theological and practical themes (as noted above), the curriculum includes narratives that give a picture of God acting in a wide variety of ways. God is most often described as *offering guidance* to God's people (individually and communally); as *creating life*, by speaking things into being, opening wombs, and impregnating Mary by God's spirit; as having *requirements* for the lives, actions, and even worship of humanity; and as having *consequences* for human disobedience.¹⁸⁵ The curriculum also describes God as being with humans (3 of 32 lessons), forgiving humans (3 of 32 lessons), and challenging the status quo – by reversing the order of who inherits blessings and by pouring God's spirit out on all persons.

My analysis takes into account the scripture texts for each lesson and the UMI editors' exegesis; therefore, it is difficult to say definitively that the curriculum emphasizes God as acting mostly in relation to our personal lives or communal lives. For many of the biblical texts, particularly from the Hebrew Bible depict God addressing the entire nation of Israel and calling the nation or community of people to collective repentance and communal action. However, many of the lessons and discussions of the

¹⁸⁵ In my review of the 32 lessons, I found that God was described as offering guidance in 6 of the 32 lessons. The other three actions named occurred in 5 lessons each.

text describe God's work in the personal lives of youth.¹⁸⁶ Therefore in holding the texts and exegesis together, we see the potential in the UMI curriculum to paint a picture of a God who works both on a personal and communal level.

However, in reviewing the curriculum narratives and scriptural texts, there is only one lesson that describes God acting in or against governments and powers.¹⁸⁷ In this lesson, God is described as the "gatherer of nations and kingdoms," and as deciding to pour out wrath to consume the world with jealous anger.¹⁸⁸

Thus in the curriculum, God is described in diverse ways and places, not particularly limited to one realm or arena of action. God is described as acting in the lives of individuals and communities. However, while the curriculum includes evidence of God working in varied ways, the more prevalent images present a God who is not particularly involved beyond the personal and communal. The majority of the exegesis in the curriculum refers to God's work and interactions with individual persons.

Action

Although, the concepts of change and human action are closely related, in this section I focus primarily on the actions which are directly encouraged in the UMI curriculum. While I will discuss action in the next section on *Change*, I do not want to

¹⁸⁶ Thus it could have been useful to analyze the scriptures and the lessons separately – however, that would assume that the youth are not learning reading the texts alone, or only see the scripture as interpreted by the UMI editors. Therefore, in holding the two together I remain more consistent with the way that youth experience the curriculum.

¹⁸⁷ See JAM Summer 2007, Lesson 6. I am clear to make a distinction between God acting in communities and explicit governmental systems, even while noting that much of the language of God speaking to the Nation of Israel can be seen as both God addressing or acting in a community and a nation/governmental system. However, the texts in my subsample do not include this type of language or intercession on God's behalf (even in the Nation of Israel's leadership).

It is important to note that two units did include the Joseph narratives that describe God working through an individual to affect change or at least infiltrate the Pharaoh's palace. However, the lessons in my sample of 32 do not include or emphasize these events.

¹⁸⁸ The scripture text for the lesson was Zephaniah 3:1-5, 8-9. Thus the language of God working against nations and kingdoms, of calling the city oppressive and the officials and judges corrupt is in the Biblical text and is not discussed explicitly in the UMI editor's exegesis of the text.

conflate the data and note that many actions do not imply or include “change.” As noted above each UMI lesson includes a final section designed to encourage youth to apply key principles from the lesson, therefore I looked closely at these activity sections, aptly titled “Do It” and “Jam On it.”¹⁸⁹

I initially conceptualized the question about action to include sub-categories such as charity or good works. This conceptualization assumed that in the lessons, youth would think about and see their religion as addressing particular problems; however many of the lessons do not address nor attend to problems in the world. Thus, in my discussion of action, I moved to a more general reflection on the types of action called for, and thus I expanded my initial sub-categories to look at the specific action verbs utilized in the lessons and to look at the areas in which youth were called to act.¹⁹⁰

In reviewing the actions encouraged, I found that 19 of the 32 (almost 60%) encouraged personal religious actions. Two lessons called for personal actions, such as self reflection about happiness or leadership. Three lessons called for interpersonal action, including getting along better with siblings and thinking of ways to reach out to

¹⁸⁹ Each UMI lesson, in the teacher’s guide and the student work books, has a section that calls youth to some type of action or application of the lesson’s themes. (The teacher’s guide of the Inteen curriculum has a section in each lesson plan entitled “Arousing Action”, the corresponding student workbooks have a section entitled “Do It”). Thus, it is important to note that while my underlying assumptions point to the significance of action in transformative education, it is not only my underlying assumptions that prompted me to attend to the types of actions and responses youth make to the UMI lesson. From the structure of the lessons, action/application is an important and constitutive element of their curriculum design.

Therefore, the distinction I am making in my analysis is around the types of action called for. I also note a discrepancy in how we are defining action. In that I emphasize (maybe too much), communal and physical action, beyond the cognitive action of thinking or even the religious actions of praying, etc. as a means of responding or applying the lesson aims.

¹⁹⁰ See the Curriculum and Sermon Analysis Schema at the end of this chapter for a fuller understanding of the ways that I am utilizing: personal, interpersonal, communal, and societal. I began to utilize these terms to both describe the types of actions required and the places where youth were instructed to act. I in turn saw these as indicative of the areas that youth were understood to have influence and agency in.

Some of the specific verbs I observed were action such as talk, pray, reflect, write.

persons who may be overlooked. Three lessons also called for communal action – in which I include the lessons that encouraged youth to reflect on the wrongs committed in their communities, to reflect on communal media practices, and calls to cultivate a better community. Two lessons each called for interpersonal religious and communal religious action. An example of communal religious action included encouraging youth to appreciate God’s creation, by working with family and community members to care for the earth.¹⁹¹

Religious Actions

In the lessons, two patterns emerged. First, the most prevalent actions were religious actions. The curriculum called youth to new or renewed religious behaviors, such as being faithful, trusting God, and prayer. However, it is also important to note that the types of religious change and action called for are limited. Above, we saw that the majority curriculum emphasized personal religious action, with a small percentage calling for any type of interpersonal or communal action. Absent from this discussion is an example of societal religious action. While religious action should include spiritual disciplines such as prayer and actions that are grounded in biblical truths, faith in God, and in desires to be more like God; these actions should also assume that biblical truths and the attributes of God apply beyond religious spheres and beyond individual persons. For example, in the Sunday school lessons from the Hebrew Bible prophets, a more thorough exegesis of the texts includes many implications for communal action, and ways to push youth to reflect on injustice in their society, and in a communal and systemic way learn to be more faithful to what God requires of the people. However, the

¹⁹¹ See JAM, Fall 2007, Lesson1

editors emphasized personal religious action overlooking other potential actions and ways of responding to the lessons.

Reflection as Action

A second trend that emerged in the lessons was the popularity of reflection as action. Thirteen of the thirty-two Sunday school lessons ask youth to reflect or think about part of the lesson during the upcoming week. While reflection is necessary and important to cultivate among youth, the curriculum does not push youth beyond reflection to a point of even thinking about moving or working.¹⁹² For example, in the sample of lessons reviewed for this dissertation, the class is never encouraged to work together to form a response or to do service in their church or community. In other words, the lessons not only focus overwhelmingly on the personal dimensions of spirituality, they emphasize passive, non-action oriented spirituality. Therefore looking at my larger questions of fragmented spirituality or trends towards fragmentation – this sample of Sunday school curriculum demonstrates a lack of in-depth thinking and analysis of systemic and social and communal injustices in the Bible and contemporary world, and a lack of pedagogy that pushes toward action and behavioral changes.

Even as I expect to see curriculum which is skewed toward personal piety and behaviors such as purity or church attendance, overwhelming the most prevalent action was reflection and prayer. Reflection and prayer are very powerful practices – however I question if reflection and prayer, which do not serve as a catalyst for other types of action, can cultivate a substantive spirituality. Part of my question originates in the

¹⁹² While this type of first and second order questioning and reflection are appropriate for testing mastery of the biblical lessons or lesson goals; to remain limited to simple reflections on issues or asking family members about how they are responding to questions raised in the Sunday school lesson inhibits youth's ability to move from thought to action in the world around them.

influence of community organizing and social change movements in my dissertation research and understanding of spirituality. For example, both emphasize the need to not only reflect on the current realities but to then create actionable items – to determine winnable causes, realistic objectives, and means of moving toward them. However, in reviewing the UMI curriculum this type of strategizing is not present and raises the question of whether the educational resources (and by extension the church) encourage youth to treat religion and God as simply a cerebral matter, as something to think about, or as something that has very limited influence. In other words, the absence of more concrete, communal, and societal action, in addition to reflection, forces us to ask the question of “can religion be seen as a resource for broader, more strategic action in the world and community around youth?”

Interpersonal Action

The UMI editors also emphasize many goals and outcomes of religious education, which my initial analysis questions did not allow for. For example, in my initial questions regarding the themes, issues, and types actions named in the curriculum, I focused primarily on personal-individual *or* communal-collective issues and actions. However, the editors of UMI repeatedly emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in the lives of adolescents; thus beyond demonstrating another trend in the data, the editors reminded me of the essential nature of an interpersonal category in any analysis of adolescent activities and education.

However, the focus on interpersonal relationships and actions, though illuminating of adolescent development is not without issues in the curriculum. The focus on the interpersonal can often be to the exclusion of key elements of the biblical texts at

the center of the lessons. While this focus helps students apply the biblical texts to their lives, it does not fully capitalize on the ways that the curriculum can empower students to think about their relationships and how these relationships fit into a larger world, system, and historical narrative.

In some instances, the editors chose not to do a careful exposition of the biblical text, in order to discuss personal and interpersonal situations.¹⁹³ For example, in the Summer 2007 quarter, the focus was on the Hebrew Bible prophets and calls for justice and righteous. The *Inteen* editor offered a story about concerned parents and grandparents who were discussing whether their daughter (grand-daughter) was involved in doing drugs. However, the biblical text for the lesson was from Isaiah and discussed the need for the people to respond to those who have been oppressed and to care for the widows and orphans.¹⁹⁴ The connection between the interpersonal practical narrative and the biblical text was not clear and demonstrates a decision (intentional or unintentional) on the part of the authors to focus on interpersonal issues as a lens of interpreting the text and disregarding or underemphasizing the biblical text.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ This could also reflect a lack of comfort in addressing communal or systemic issues on the part of the editorial team.

¹⁹⁴ See *Inteen*, Summer 2007, lesson 3. The scriptural text for the lesson is Isaiah 1: 10-11, 14-20. The editors also use the standard memory verse for the lesson of Isaiah 1:17 “Learn to do what is right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (New International Version)

¹⁹⁵ See *Inteen*, Summer 2007, lesson 3. Here I quote the narrative for the lesson:

“Mama, Pam can stop whenever she wants to. She doesn’t have a problem with drugs. I’m her mother. I know these things.”

“Darling, you are Pam’s mother, but you’re not God. There are some things you may not know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t know it all. The truth may be staring you in the face, and you may be missing it.”

“I know my child.”

“Can we be honest, Brenda?” Brenda sat quietly, holding the phone to her ear and letting the moment pass. “Brenda?”

“Yes, I’m here, Mama.”

Change

In reviewing the subsample of the curriculum, I found that overwhelmingly the concept of change, in terms of a break from or challenge to a normative form of behavior, belief or attitude, was not explicitly included in each lesson. More specifically, it became evident that my presumptions and definition of change, which builds upon theological understandings of conversion and repentance, as well as social and systemic understandings of change as social and personal reform, is not evidenced in the curriculum. After reading closer, for the implicit calls for change, I found that over one third of the lessons did not include any call for change.¹⁹⁶

Although the UMI curriculum does not include explicit processes for theological or social and systemic change, the curriculum lifts up “change” in terms of renewal of religious commitments and practices. Half of the sample included language, if not a direct call, which points toward the need for new, or a return to particular, religious

“Baby, I made mistakes with you. And I didn’t see some of the issues that you struggled with when you were finishing high school. I don’t want you to miss Pam’s transitions and how you can be with her through them. But there are some things you’ll never want to face because you’re her mom.”

“I’m not in denial. I just don’t believe she’s doing drugs.”...

“What about the sex?”

“The sex? She’s not having sex. I asked her.” Brenda snapped back.

“Has she ever lied to you?”

“Yes, but not about this?”...

The narrative seems disconnected from the rest of the lesson. It does not offer the best example of responding to those who have been oppressed or even working with the fatherless, etc. The narrative focuses on the need of a parent to face facts of her child’s behavior and to encourage her child to do what is right (in terms of drugs and sex). The scripture and follow up questions (which included: “How is Brenda resisting in the story? How does this text relate to our treatment of the oppressed? Who would the oppressed be in our day and society? What are some ways you can ‘learn to do well’ in relationships as a Christian?”); however also include questions about oppressed persons and the need to work on behalf of the oppressed.

[It appears that this lesson was underdeveloped – because of the lack of textual background or exegesis that is relevant to both the narrative and the scripture].

¹⁹⁶ 11 of the 32 lessons (or 34 % of the lessons) did not include any identifiable call to change (either personal, systemic, communal, religious, etc.).

practices and perspectives.¹⁹⁷ The lessons included language encouraging the youth to embrace God's power within humans by being creative, to remember God's faithfulness in bad or lonely situations, to remain strong in their faith, looking for examples of others to encourage their faithfulness, and even calls to act more like God and to understand the great gift of salvation from Jesus.¹⁹⁸

On the other hand, about 15% of the lessons¹⁹⁹ reviewed contain a call for communal or social change.²⁰⁰ Despite the limited number, these lessons include calls to meaningful engagement in the youth's communities, churches and neighborhoods. One lesson included encouragement to "tell the whole story" in addressing the systemic misrepresentation of communities, particularly African Americans, in the mainstream media. Youth were invited to review current media stories to observe how African Americans and other ethnic groups are addressed.²⁰¹ Another lesson also included a call for youth to correct injustices and "stand for what is right" by looking around their communities to identify an injustice or concern and to take specific action to correct it.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ I initially classified each of these as some type of personal action or change, I began to see that there was a trend among what the editors wanted to emphasize in terms of the specifically religious and personal practices.

¹⁹⁸ Each of these examples are lifted from my notes on the curriculum and are not direct quotes from the lessons.

¹⁹⁹ Or five of the 32 lessons I included in this sub-sample. These lessons were *JAM*, Summer 2007 lessons 1 and 6; *JAM* summer 2008 lesson 1, *InTeen*, Summer 2007, lessons 2, and *InTeen*, Fall 2008, lesson 2

²⁰⁰ It is important to note that the change outlined/encouraged in the lessons is limited to the churches and neighborhoods of youth. While I think the curriculum can push towards more activism and socio-political change, because there are ways and needs for youth to be involved in those areas as well, the limits of communal change to the neighborhoods and churches of youth is an excellent start in that youth, in early adolescence are only beginning to think about and become a part of communities beyond their family, church, neighborhood, and school and thus it makes sense to appeal to the communities that they are already a part of, before empowering youth to work or take action in larger (and often more amorphous communities.)

²⁰¹ See UMI, *Jam*, Summer 2007. Lesson 6, p.16 for the full discussion of the purpose of the Associated Negro Press and the activity asking youth to investigate if the truth or "whole story" is being told about Black people and other ethnic groups

²⁰² This lesson is also found in the UMI, *Jam*, Summer 2007, Lesson 1, p.4. Sticking with the overall theme of the unit around print media and the opening story of the lesson, discussing the role of the

Within the 15% percent of the lessons which include calls for communal change, I also include *communal religious change*; for example, in one lesson youth were encouraged to see the unique role that each can play in the community of faith, the youth were asked to reflect on how they could use their gifts or talents for the benefit of the community, and to think about how they were going to work in their churches and neighborhoods. In addition to strategizing about how they could use their talents in their communities, another lesson asked youth to “commit to praying” for confession and repentance in their churches and communities.

Perspectives on Adolescents in the Curriculum

In addition to attending to the theological content of the curriculum, I also analyzed the ways that adolescents were discussed in each lesson. The purpose of this analysis was to ascertain the perspectives of the UMI editors regarding youth and to determine how youth are viewed and portrayed in the curriculum. In particular, I attended to whether youth were portrayed as active agents, as passive recipients, or somewhere in between. I also explored the types of struggles or concerns of adolescents raised by the editors and the types of behavior or actions the editors lift up as appropriate for adolescents.

The *Inteen* and *JAM* curricula are designed specifically for lower and middle adolescents; thus youth are the key actors and the target audience of the lessons. However, the curriculum includes some limitations in the types of behaviors and responses that adolescents are portrayed as making. For example, youth are most often

Chicago Defender in the Civil Rights movement, the editors encourage youth to work together and to write an editorial addressing the concern or injustice they see in their community. [while I would also like the editors to encourage youth to respond in other ways, it is very helpful for them to offer a concrete/explicit example of how young people can get involved and participate in standing up for what is right on a communal level.]

depicted as struggling with issues in their lives: Youth in the opening narratives are portrayed as struggling with health and body issues (such as gaining weight), as struggling with loneliness and finding real happiness, and as getting in trouble in school. The narratives also include youth interpersonal struggles with siblings, parents, friends, and in romantic relationships.²⁰³

While most of the opening narratives had a religious undertone or implication, only seven of the sub-sample of lessons (less than 25%) included explicit or primarily religious concerns or actions in their discussion of adolescents. In these lessons youth were portrayed as struggling and thriving in their faith. In some lessons youth were portrayed as struggling to trust God or to figure out how to serve God everywhere; in other lessons youth were portrayed as “feeling the spirit move,” as being blessed by God, and as actively witnessing to other youth about God.

In addition to many of the personal and interpersonal narratives and struggles of youth, the lessons also include many positive portrayals of youth as actively involved and working.²⁰⁴ For example, one lesson describes a young woman giving her old clothes to a family in need, another describes a young man showing compassion to a homeless man; while, others depict youth as organizing events in their schools and churches. Overall, 13 of the 32 lessons (or over 40%), portray youth as taking positive action in the world

²⁰³Sibling and Parental struggles were the most prevalent with a frequency of three, each; whereas, friendships and romantic relationships were only mentioned once each in the sub sample of 32 lessons.

It is also important to note that struggles with family or parents are not the only way that youth are described interpersonally. The lesson narratives also include images of youth being encouraged by their parents or other adults (4 of 32 lessons).

²⁰⁴ I am not attempting to overlook the negative portrayals of youth in the lessons; however, there were significantly less negative images than positive. For example in the subsample, youth are described as fighting with siblings, as whining, making jokes and not having a good understanding of the importance of serving others. However, as noted these are only 4 out of 32 lessons, as compared to the over 40% of the lessons that lift up youth as taking positive action.

Also it is important to note that I do not include struggles or questions as negative portrayals of youth. In the list of negative portrayals I only include examples where the youth is not described as trying to work through their issues or being reflective about their struggles.

around them and lift up young people as capable of action. In this way, UMI is making tremendous strides in empowering youth to take action and to see themselves as capable.

Discussions of Race and Ethnicity in the Curriculum

Given the historical emphasis of UMI on creating religious education curricula which speaks to the lives and heritage of Black youth, I analyzed each lesson attending to the ways that the editors address race or ethnicity. I reflected on the presence or absence of discussions of race and ethnicity in the curriculum to better ascertain if the religious educational materials offer youth ways of thinking of their racial and ethnic heritage in connection with their religious identity. In other words, I explore whether a curriculum designed particularly, but not exclusively for African American youth, models ways of connecting the African American and Christian identities and heritages.

In the review of the sub-sample of lessons, I found that only 16 % (or 5 of the 32) of the lessons explicitly mention race or ethnicity. In one lesson, the opening narrative mentioned the presence of portraits of significant “Black Scholars like Mary Bethune, W.E.B. DuBois, and Howard Thurman,” lining the walls of the principal’s office as the protagonist talks with the principal, and the principal commends him for the way he treated a homeless man in their community.²⁰⁵ Similarly, the other lessons that explicitly mention race or ethnicity do so in ways that lift up the positive accomplishments of African Americans—with only brief allusions to the major struggles of African Americans throughout history. For example, the remainder of the citations comes from the *J.A.M. Summer 2007* curriculum; the editors chose as a theme of “In Fine Print” and each lesson focused on the work and accomplishments of African Americans as writers and publishers in print media: including magazines, Sunday school curricula, poetry, and

²⁰⁵ *InTeen*, Summer 2007, Lesson 5, p.17

children's books. In this unit, the lessons offered a discussion of race and struggles for equality. They described the ways that African Americans had to create alternative forms of media (including the Associated Negro Press) in order to have fair and equal treatment in the media and to have access to issues of concern to African Americans.

As noted in the background of the UMI curriculum above, the "Teaching for Success Kit" presents the "best practices" for using the UMI curriculum and includes sample lesson plans, worksheets, games, and materials for creating bulletin boards. Thus in reviewing these kits, I found that in addition to the discussions of race or ethnicity in the actual student lessons, the Teaching for Success kits offer posters and brief biographies of three African American figures. However, the information is not included in the student and teacher workbooks and thus *does not* necessarily factor into the lessons each quarter.²⁰⁶ In other words, it is possible to utilize the UMI curriculum without including the African American history. This practice of making available, but not fully integrating information on African American heritage and history raises questions about the current mission of UMI and its understanding of the role of African American history in educating African American youth.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ From my own experiences teaching the UMI Sunday school curriculum in two predominately African American churches, I cannot recall ever using the African American heritage posters or information. Neither can I remember connecting the history of African American people with the Biblical lessons.

Thus it remains to be seen if the addition of this information has any impact on the students or is even utilized in terms of their religious education. Also for churches that cannot afford to purchase the addition resources, is there any way for them to access the African American history dimensions of the curriculum.

Therefore it appears that in the 8 units I reviewed, the African American history worksheets is an appendix to the curriculum and not an integral part of UMI's bible lessons.

²⁰⁷ Many other religious educators have noted and offered strategies for integrating African American heritage and Christian Identity. Some examples include Anne E. Wimberly, *Soul Stories*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) and Yolanda Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004).

Sermons

Why Sermons?

From some of the earliest accounts of the religious practices of the descendents of enslaved Africans in the U.S., contained in classic texts such as W. E. Du Bois' 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, to more contemporary works on the influence of televangelism in the African American Christianity,²⁰⁸ the significance of preaching and sermons in African American Christian worship is repeatedly underscored. In describing his first "Negro Revival" Du Bois characterizes it by the "preacher, the music and the frenzy."²⁰⁹ Whereas Du Bois' account depicts much of the performative nature of preaching in the revival service, his work also addresses the significance of preaching for the moral and religious instruction of the Negro community.²¹⁰ Du Bois' description and critique of Negro preachers reiterates the central role that preachers play in the African American church and community. This central role of preachers also underscores the significance of the content of their sermons for the lives of African American adults and youth. In many cases, pastors and preachers offer models of leadership and authority – thus their words not only reflect a theological perspective, but can often carry the weight of being the *Word of God* for that community.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ See Shane Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, for examples of the influence of televangelism and TV ministries within African American Christianity.

²⁰⁹ W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: First Vintage Books, Library of America ed., 1990 [1903]).

²¹⁰ Also see W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro Church*, (New York: AltaMira Press, 2003, a reprint of the 1903 edition).

²¹¹ Although many argue that the power of the Black church and clergy is waning among this generation of youth, I still affirm the power of clergy within African American churches and communities. It is my opinion that while the many youth are exposed to innumerable images and potential role models from the media and internet, clergy and other community leaders still have a significant role to play as they offer tangible role models and influence in the lives of youth.

Similarly, in their seminal study of the *Black Church in the African American Experience*, Lincoln and Mamiya write that

The sermon assumes a degree of importance in the black worship service which cannot be matched by its institutional counterparts in other religious communities. Throughout the historical development of the Black church over the past two hundred years, the sermon has served a wide variety of functions and purposes: its primary purpose has been to glorify God but it has also served as *theological education and Sunday School*; ritual drama and show time; singing and humming; encouragement and political advice; and moralizing and therapy – all rolled into one.²¹²

Because of the multifaceted nature of preaching in the Black church, Lincoln and Mamiya turned to preachers and sermon content for evidence of the impact of Black theology and Black consciousness in Black Churches, post civil rights movements.

Honoring the prominence and importance of preaching within the African American community, I also attend to this vital source of Black Religious thought in an effort to uncover the types of theology presented to African American youth and to ascertain how this theology fosters and/or ameliorates fragmented spirituality.

Methodology of Sermon Selection

The significance of clergy is also pointed toward in the YTI survey results recounted in the previous chapter. When asked who they admired in the community for making a difference, the sample of youth lifted up many clergy persons.

Also see Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 16-22. Here Andrews offers a description of the significance and function of preaching in African American religion. While Andrews is focusing on the role of sermons and black preaching in pastoral care and ecclesiology in the African American church, his work still offers tremendous insights on the role and significance of preaching and sermons in the African American church.

²¹² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 175. [emphasis added]

My sample includes sermons from ten predominately African American churches.²¹³ The sermons collected were all preached within the past four years and span the years of 2006-2009. My general criteria included selecting:

- Sermons from diverse African American Christian traditions or denominations²¹⁴
- Sermons from a broad geographical area.
- Sermons from congregations of varying sizes.

While I collected sermons from several churches, I chose to focus only on ten churches and sermons. This decision was both in response to my desire to not become overwhelmed by sermon data, as this sample is also only one portion of my larger research project, and because my purpose is to offer a brief exploration of the types of “on the ground” theology preached in African American churches. I do not attempt to offer a sample that statistically predicts trends within the larger constellation of African American churches. Thus by attending to the sermons from a smaller sample of churches we are still able to see particular examples of Black preaching and theology.²¹⁵

Therefore, my sample of sermons is a strategic convenience sample and thus reflects some biases and limitations. For example, the sample focuses on churches primarily in the Atlanta area.²¹⁶ Five of the sermons are from churches in the Atlanta,

²¹³ In my initial IRB protocol, my goal was to review a sample of 20 sermons. However, in terms of time, cost, and research outcomes it became clear that reviewing 20 sermons did not improve my ability to make more generalizable claims about African American churches, a sample of N=500 -1000 would be necessary for statistically significant results. Thus I opted for a smaller sample that I could explore more closely.

²¹⁴ In the project I sought to include a range of denominations, including historically African American denominations and predominately African American churches within “mainline” denominations; as well as non-denominational churches.

²¹⁵ As I stated in reviewing my interview and curriculum data, my goal is not to making sweeping generalizations about all African American churches or adolescents; however my attempt is to simply see if there is some evidence that supports the claims and trends of fragmentation among African American adolescents.

²¹⁶ Studying one locale such as Atlanta does not present a significant problem in terms of looking at African American religious life. A strong case can be made for looking closely at the religious life of one particular community, particularly a community with a significant African American population. Also Atlanta, GA both historically and currently has a significant role in the African American religious

Georgia metropolitan area, with two churches in Texas, one church each in Maryland, Florida and New York.

In addition to regional diversity, I attempted to ensure a slightly more representative sample by choosing sermons from a combination of local and national ministries. I define local and national ministries based on whether the preachers and churches focus mostly on local or national audiences and on whether the preachers claim national recognition and prominence in the African American Christian community—as evidenced in their preaching itineraries, their publications, their multimedia broadcasts, and in general, the size of the church. The local sermons were obtained by contacting local pastors and requesting their participation in the research by submitting sermons to be included in my analysis.²¹⁷ The national sermons were collected using multimedia downloads from Christian media outlets, such as *Streaming Faith*²¹⁸ and directly from the church or ministry websites.²¹⁹ In selecting the national sermons, I decided to use sermons that were the most popular, had received the most “hits” or purchases, on the

landscape. Atlanta is home to historic churches, such as Ebenezer, Wheat Street, Bethel A.M.E. which played prominent roles in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s. Presently, Atlanta is also home to several prominent African American mega-churches and served as the host city for Bishop T. D. Jakes’ *Megafest* conference for several years – bringing millions of African American Christians together in the Georgia Dome and downtown Atlanta area.

However, I chose to expand my sample to include a more national sample of churches, simply based on the fact that my interviews were conducted with youth from all over the United States. And while I did not choose to collect sermons (and in some cases was not able to) from the congregations of my interviewees, I wanted my sample, though limited and small to represent some of the locales and regions of the country they live in.

²¹⁷ See Appendix E for a sample consent form. Also while I asked pastors to select the sermons they wanted to include, most left the decision to me, thus I randomly selected sermons from the list of CDs available, as to not further add bias/skew to the sample.

This also turned out to be another somewhat skewed sample of convenience, as I only received consent from pastors that I was already affiliated with. However, I did not see a great difference in their sermon from that of the national sermons, as is revealed in my analysis below.

²¹⁸ www.streamingfaith.com

In addition to selling previously recorded sermons and resources, Streaming Faith is most well known for providing live broadcasts of worship services via the internet. Thus, in many cases one can participate in an unedited worship experience around the globe through the website.

²¹⁹ The national sermons are included without the explicit permission of the preacher, but under the basis that their sermons are available as part of public media for consumption and analysis.

multimedia outlets. While popularity does not indicate the exact impact of the sermons, it does give a sense of the influence (in terms of the number of persons listening to and purchasing) of the particular sermons. The sample includes four local churches and six national ministries.²²⁰

Also in selecting sermons from both popular national preachers and local congregations, I am attempting to show some of the range of preaching and ministries that currently make up the African American church. Initially, my research protocol only included sermons from local pastors; however, I soon realized that this sample would not address or reflect larger trends in African American Christianity.²²¹ For while the majority of African American churches are still in the small to medium membership range (with less than 1000 members), there is an increasing desire and trend towards mega ministries that is impacting even the ways that smaller churches are conducting their ministries and presenting their theology.

Looking at the demographic data of the sermon sample, I note that the sample is skewed towards Baptist and non-denominational ministries. Of the ten churches, my sample includes four Baptist churches, four Non-denominational churches, one African Methodist Episcopal Church and one church affiliated with the United Church of Christ. The sample includes churches that can be characterized as part of the historically Black

²²⁰ It is also important to note that in analyzing sermons from Atlanta area churches it was somewhat difficult to fully categorize local vs. national ministries, in that many of the churches located in the Atlanta metropolitan area also claim a significant national following (such as churches like Bishop Eddie Long's *New Birth Missionary Baptist Church* and Creflo Dollar's *World Changers Ministry*).

²²¹ Also in collecting sermons from only local pastors, I was concerned that those who consented to participate in my research would only be the pastors that knew me well or were affiliated with Emory or my current church. Looking at this potential pool of pastors and preachers I feared that I would only attract sermons from liberal, progressive, socially active and communally oriented churches. And while I enjoy and am excited about the work of these churches in the Atlanta area, these groups in no way represent the dominant perspectives or experiences, even within African American Christianity in Atlanta. Thus I opted to include both local pastors and a sample of national oriented ministries.

denominations, as well as inclusive of contemporary trends within African American Christianity – which includes a waning emphasis on denominationalism and a continued emphasis on the role of the charismatic preacher or leader within the spiritual community.

The sample is also skewed towards larger and mega-church sized ministries.²²² The sample includes five churches with membership over 5,000 people; two churches with membership of 1000-5000 people; two churches of 200-999 members, and one church with less than 200 members. The sample is also heavily skewed toward male preachers, with sermons from eight males and two females.

The sample represents some balance in church history and organization, in that half of the national ministries are very new, with the ministries emerging in the last 20 years. In these churches the pastors also tend to be the organizers as well. However, the sample also includes churches that have been established for generations and can be viewed as pillars within the national and local African American community.

In selecting sermons, I only selected sermons from “regular” African American worship services. I intentionally do not focus on sermons specifically designed or created for African American adolescents, such as sermons from youth groups, youth church, or youth revivals. While, many larger African American churches are developing specialized ministries for the youth, the prevalence of youth group and/or youth church among African Americans is still considerably less than in European American or Mainline denominations. Christian Smith, in his seminal research of the religious lives of adolescents, notes that African American youth participate in youth group at rates of 44%, less than the national sample average of 52%, and considerably less than the 64%

²²² This again is a result of choosing to focus on ministries in the Atlanta area and a result of selecting sermons from multimedia websites.

of youth group attendance among Conservative and Mainline Protestants.²²³ While youth worship services and revivals play a very significant role in the religious lives of African American youth, these events tend to be an annual, or at best a monthly, occurrence.²²⁴ The infrequency of youth revivals or special *Youth Sundays* does not diminish my understanding of their significance in the overall development of youth in African American Christian communities; however I see it as only one part of a more complicated calendar of youth spiritual development. In most cases, active youth participants in the African American church spend the majority of their time in “big church” or “regular church” with the adults, listening to and being exposed to the sermons and influence of senior pastors. For this reason, I chose to analyze the sermon content of “regular,” non-youth specific worship services. Additionally, analyzing non-youth specific worship sermons offers some insights into how African American adolescents are viewed and fit into the larger experiences, expressions, and theology of African American churches.

*Anonymity*²²⁵

In my research, I do not reveal or publish the sources of the sermon information as to neither skew nor promote the materials of any pastor, local or national. Instead I created a coding system that identifies pertinent demographic information about the church and preacher – while protecting their identity and copyrights.

²²³ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, (New York: Oxford, 2005), pp 51-53.

²²⁴ At some point I would find it interesting to do a comparison of the theological and practical content presented in youth geared services and that of the typical Sunday worship service.

²²⁵ I made this determination before reviewing any of the sermon materials, because I was uncertain of my findings and whether or not my research would present the sermons in a positive or negative light. And while the local church pastors readily consented to participate and help in my dissertation research, there was hesitation and concern about publicizing negative information about any particular ministry/pastor/church. Thus to avoid this, I decided not to directly quote any of the sermon materials and to maintain the anonymity of each church included (both local and national ministries).

Sermon Analysis methodology

The methodology for reviewing the sermons parallels the process of analyzing the UMI curriculum. It included listening to each sermon carefully, taking notes on the general content and structure of the sermon. After listening and note-taking, I answered the guiding questions regarding the theological themes, practical topics, understandings of God and adolescents, types of change and/or human action included in each sermon. After completing the analysis worksheets, answering each of the guiding questions, I summarized each response, creating a combined analysis chart, from which I sought to see if there were any commonalities and general trends among the sermon content.

Sermon Findings

Theological Themes

From the sermon titles and biblical texts alone, it is evident that the sermon sample addresses a variety of theological and practical themes.²²⁶ In the sample, half of the sermons address New Testament scriptures (Mark, John, Acts, Ephesians and 2 Corinthians) and the others address four books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Habakkuk, and Psalm).²²⁷ From this variety of scriptural references, the preachers present sermons which I categorize as focusing on three major themes:

²²⁶ Please see Appendix D for the summary chart of sermon titles, texts, and themes.

²²⁷ The individual sermons included themes of Transformation, Unity, Reconciliation, Silence/Speech, Destiny and God's Favor, Faith, Salvation, Wrath and Anger of God, Warning/ Fear, Calling, **God's Plan and Purpose** for our lives, Worth, Ability, Worship and Praise, Trusting God, **Redemption**, the plan of redemption was already established before the "fall of man" ever took place., Anointing Intimacy with God, Remembering God, God's Time, Love: a more excellent way, Freedom/Liberation, Transforming into the image of Christ, Authority, Love -- opposite of selfishness, Faith, Favor/Blessings, Destiny/Plans, Authority, Change.

- *Transformation*²²⁸

In each of these sermons, the preacher encourages the hearer to embrace some type of change or transformation in their lives. For example, in “Miraculous Success”, the preacher is simply encouraging the hearers to never become too proud to ask God for the transformation they need or want in their lives. He reminds them to speak up when there is an opportunity to receive or get the healing and change that one needs. Similarly, in “A More Excellent Way” the preacher reminds the congregation that God always offers us an alternative or better way of living and doing things. She even encourages religious persons to transform their way of understanding God, from simply a God of retribution to embrace a God of love. She further offers Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* to demonstrate the depth to which we have bought into many myths about life and God. And she reminds the hearer that even though transformation is not easy, there is something better beyond what is familiar.

- *Overcoming*²²⁹

In the next category, the sermons focus on God empowering people to overcome particular struggles in their lives. While this category parallels greatly with the first, I lift it up as distinctive because the sermons tend to point to God working in specific situations and empowering individuals to overcome obstacles such as feeling unworthy and unable,²³⁰ as struggling with issues that are plaguing families in the African American community, and as struggling to remain faithful in the midst of difficult social, economic and political circumstances. Again the sermons emphasize God’s activity in the lives of people—removing obstacles and overcoming difficult life histories.

²²⁸ This theme includes the sermons: 03MNMDX, 05NNTXX, 11ULGAL, 04NNNYM

²²⁹ This theme includes the sermons: 07NLGAS, 02BNFLZ, 10BNTXX

²³⁰ Sermon 07NLGAS

- *Warning and Correction*²³¹

While each of the sermons contains some element of correction and admonition, one sermon stands apart because its main focus is to remind the hearers of God's ability to become angry and to take away God's favor, grace, and blessings from their lives. Unlike the other sermons, the pastor seeks to counter the notion that God is only good and loving; and that nothing can be done to counter the benevolence of God.

Undergirding each of the themes, at the heart of each sermon the preachers are admonishing the people to have *faith in God* and to *live according to God's way*. Each preacher presents his or her own understanding of *God's way* and makes the case based on Biblical texts as to why we should trust that God's way is correct or will lead to the desired outcomes.

In spite of this diversity of subthemes, it is always important to ask "what is NOT presented?" or "what is given the least attention?" In particular, when thinking about fragmented spirituality I most often question if or how the sermons hold together a strong faith in God and a strong commitment to act in personal, communal, and social realms, motivated by God. Essentially, does the sermon contain elements of multiple dimensions of faith? Looking across the sermons, I found that none included both of these elements. As noted above, each sermon encouraged the hearers to put their faith in God and to follow God's way/plan; however, none of the sermons tied this faith in God to acting beyond the personal and interpersonal level (even if they named issues taking place in the community).²³²

²³¹ This theme includes Sermon 09BLGAL

²³² I make this assertion looking in particular at Sermon 10BNTXX. Here the preacher catalogues many of the issues facing Black Families and Black communities/villages and he encourages the hearers by reminding them that "even though their families may be a hot mess, their future can be blessed." In other

Similarly, in looking beyond the themes to a simple analysis of the language employed in each sermon, I noted that the words *justice*, *injustices*, and *oppression* only came up in two sermons. Each of these occurred as the preacher was offering the background for the scripture text of the sermon.²³³ For example, one preacher in a discussion of the prophet Habakkuk states that “Habakkuk gets upset because of all the *injustice* and chaos going on around him in Judah and he gets upset because it appears that God is not doing anything.”²³⁴ In this sermon, the preacher focuses on how the hearers should respond when it appears that God is silent; yet he does not address the systemic injustices that were taking place during that historical period or that occur today. At best, he offers the hearers strategies for remaining faithful to God in the middle of “hard times.”

A second preacher referred to the oppression of the ancient Israelites as she gave her background and history for her sermon on Psalm 121. She analyzed the differences in the types of oppression the Israelites experienced, comparing the physical bondage and slavery in Egypt with a more psychological captivity in Babylon. This preacher moves further, giving us a glimpse of the way that biblical discussions can point to discussions of modern oppression, and she argues that “Often we don’t know how oppressed we are because it is so psychologically skillful.”²³⁵ Here again, I anticipated the preacher offering more modern and concrete examples of psychological oppression for the hearers

words, in the sermon he offers hope of a better future, without really pushing the people or giving them an example of what working for that hope, beyond waiting on the blessings of God, will look like. There is little mention of public policy change or voting, etc. However, given the focus on the familial unit this is not surprising and thus the few strategies offered are addressed at interpersonal dynamics within the family, even as he has named larger systemic issues taking place in the wider African American community.

²³³ This parallels with my findings in the UMI curriculum. In that often the biblical passages offer examples of God working for justice or addresses issues of injustice and oppression; however, the curriculum and sermons do not draw out these biblical themes.

²³⁴ Sermon 02BNFLX

²³⁵ Sermon 04NNNYM

to connect with. However, she chose to stay very close to the Biblical text and moved simply to asking her hearers “have you ever felt afflicted and needed God to move, feeling oppressed day after day?”

Therefore, while two of the ten sermons offer some understanding of injustice and oppression, the discussions do not move to a fuller development or make concrete connections with contemporary struggles. In this way, the theological themes presented in the sermons tend more towards faith in God and do not expand to demonstrate how God pushes humanity to address communal and societal issues. This will be explored further in the discussion of understandings of God and actions called for.

Practical Issues and Themes

Preachers often offer stories and give analogies, drawing from the rich resources of African American culture, community concerns, news events, and even from issues in the church. They utilize these stories to help “make the scripture plain” and to help the hearers apply biblical principles to their daily lives. This practice of sharing narratives and relating scripture to daily life is prevalent throughout the sermon sample; the preachers tell stories of going to visit a West Indian doctor’s office and use analogies of ONSTAR systems to illustrate the way that God stays connected even when people veer off the correct path. The preachers reference world events, such as the death of Saddam Hussein, James Brown, and Gerald Ford;²³⁶ they tell stories from their personal lives and the lives of their children;²³⁷ and they often offer examples of struggles and problems that humans have to deal with on a regular basis (such as relationships, child rearing, financial struggles, etc.). However, instead of simply cataloguing the richness of the narrative style

²³⁶ Sermon 03MNMDX

²³⁷ Sermon 07NLGAS

and resources among African American preachers, these narratives also illustrate the many areas that the preachers, and in turn the hearers recognize as the arenas and methods in which God works. Thus in reviewing the sermon sample, it was imperative to also ascertain “what issues or practical situations were addressed?” and to see if there were any areas that were not addressed.²³⁸

The sermons addressed an array of issues, few of which overlapped. However, the most prevalent issues were a concern for *families* (5 of the 10 sermons); *material blessings* and financial struggles (5 of the 10 sermons); *relationships*-- including concerns about marriage and adultery (3 of the 10 sermons); dealing with depression and other negative *emotions* (3 sermons); and *struggles* in general (3 sermons). Only two of the sermons explicitly named or emphasized sin, and these same sermons also discussed a concern for offering excuses to God.

Looking across each of the sermons, and back at the issues presented in the Sunday School Curriculum and youth interviews, I also attempted to categorize the type of concerns emphasized in each sermon. Overwhelmingly the sermons addressed personal or individual concerns. Seven of the ten sermons addressed personal issues—such as hurt, depression, personal growth and change, and feeling unworthy. Four of the ten sermons emphasized interpersonal issues and concerns; as noted above the majority of the sermons attended to family issues, relationships, and also included in this category is a sermon that focused on disunity within the church. However, only one sermon pointed toward a communal or societal issue. In the preacher’s discussion of Black

²³⁸ In particular I asked: What issues or practical situations are addressed? personal sin? personal issues, sicknesses, wealth, etc.? communal issues? systemic/societal issues? Are issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexism, homelessness named/explored in the sermon/curriculum? Do the topics/themes presented include calls to personal piety or behavior? communal action? social justice? none? all?

families he argues that “Somewhere along the way, Black folks made a wrong turn and now we are caught up in a system...”²³⁹ In this sermon, the pastor mentions the systemic nature of problems in Black families and speaks of the need to “heal the village” and the community. None of the sermons explored or mentioned many of the injustices of the 20th or 21st century, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty (beyond individual economic struggles), and homelessness. However, in the discussions of family issues, one preacher lifted up issues of sexual abuse and violation among African American young women.

Thus, it becomes evident that while the sermons offer tremendous resources and encouragement to individuals dealing personal and familial concerns—to a large extent they do not address communal or societal issues, theologically or practically.

Understandings of God

In the sermons, God is described constantly, thus the understandings of God are varied and frequent. Therefore in order to make sense of this variety, I read through each of my analysis work sheets selecting the actions, attributes, images, or metaphors of God included in each sermon. I then noted the frequency of each of those particular words.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Sermon 10BNTXX

²⁴⁰ For the tallies see the chart below.

Key Word	Found in Phrases	Frequency
Grace	God’s has amazing grace God grants us grace and mercy. (God’s grace is big enough to cover our sins)	2 sermons
Bless	In spite of our family backgrounds, God can still bless us. God can bless us with material blessings, but we are also blessed by seeing the “Shekinah Glory” God can withhold his favor and blessings from us. God is working on a future blessing for us. God blesses us to come out of our hard times.	4 sermons

In general, God was most often understood as a very active God—each of the sermons described God as taking some type of action. These actions included *giving* blessings, favor, instruction, confidence, power and authority; *calling* humans to particular actions; *using* people to accomplish various goals; *knowing* the actions and plans of humans even before they were made; making *plans* and promises; offering protection and *covering* the sins of humans; and *changing* lives, situations and names. From the frequency analysis, I found that the most popular understandings of God referenced God’s *love* and God’s ability to *give* all manner of things to human kind. Each of these words was used as a major attribute of God in 5 of the 10 sermons.

Love	God loves us and wants to save us. God covers us with his love (protects us from harm) God of love and mercy, but God also is a God of wrath. God loves us deeply. God is love--calls us to love others, not to simply fear.	5 sermons
Gives	God can reinvent us, give us a makeover. God gives instruction through the Bible. God gives us a glimpse of the future. God calls and gives expectations. God speaks and gives us confidence. God gives us power and authority	5 sermons
Knows	God knows the more excellent ways God knows our actions before they take place God knows and plans even before stuff happens.	3 sermons
Calls	God calls and gives expectations. God calls unclean and unworthy people. God is love-calls us to love others, not to simply fear. God calls us to the process of constant evolution	2 sermons
Uses (people)	God can use people if we deal with our issues. God’s uses the apostle Paul (saves and transforms Paul) God uses men and women who would fail our moral standards. God uses the Babylonians to teach his people a lesson.	4 sermons
Plans (and Agenda)	God makes promises and has plans (and Satan tries to destroy these plans) God has plans and a place for us. God knows and plans even before stuff happens. God controls/wants to control our agenda	4 sermons
Covers	God covers us with his love God’s mercy is big enough to cover our sins	2 sermons
Change	God is going to change our lives. God can change us (change our situations/locations) God changes Jacob’s name, the prophecy his parents put on him.	3 sermons

After reviewing the analysis sheets to see which words occurred most often when talking about God in the sermons, I also attempted to understand better the *actions* and *attributes* of God emphasized in the sermon, as well as to understand how God was portrayed as relating to humankind. In particular, the sermons show God acting in myriad ways and while there is some overlap in their descriptions, as tallied above, there is still a great deal of diversity in what the preachers describe God as doing.²⁴¹ Similarly, there was very little overlap in the actual words and phrases used to describe the attributes of God. In spite of this, it is significant to explore the range of characteristics ascribed to God. In the sermons, God is referred to as:

- Almighty, has all power in his hands
- No respecter of persons
- Strong, sovereign, eternal
- Compassionate
- Silent (sometimes)
- Enough
- Strategic
- Enduring
- Loving and Merciful
- Capable of Wrath and anger, and even as *allowing* troubles to come.

Connected with the actions and attributes of God described in the sermons, each preacher presents an understanding of how God interacts with humankind. For example, one preacher as he discusses how people need to “beg God” for change in their lives,

²⁴¹ For example, God is described as

- Reinventing people and making them over
- Changing people and situations
- Showing up, covering people, protecting them
- Giving instructions to people, through people, through the bible
- Using people to carry out God’s plans
- Loving people
- Having plans, making promises, and controlling agendas
- Hearing people
- Giving humans power and authority
- Getting up, setting people free

presents God as never being able to “ignore the shouts, screams, and cries of *his* people.”²⁴² In this way, the preacher asserts that God is responsive to the needs of the people. Other preachers also affirm similar connections between God and humanity stating that “God will not leave us broken or in despair... God has not forgotten us... God will be with us in all of our situations.”²⁴³ Other preachers also proclaim that “God can be intimate and close”; that “God is actively involved in the lives of people;”²⁴⁴ and that “God has a covenant relationship with us.”²⁴⁵

The sermons collectively describe complex images of God, as actively involved in the lives of people, both using people and having specific plans for people and as bringing good and allowing troubles. While the list (nor my analysis of the list) is not exhaustive, the understandings of God working in the lives of people and being in relationship with people are quite complex.

However, one must still ask the question of “What is missing from this list?” In many ways, God is not political. Even though God is sovereign and understood to use the Babylonians to teach the children of Israel a lesson – the implications are not that God is really involved with politics. It is interesting, however, that while the content (as we will see in our discussion of the actions, changes, and themes of the sermons) does not focus on political or societal issues at great length, the understandings of God presented in the sermons are robust and tend to transcend even the limited examples that the preachers explicitly name for God to work in. The preachers present very strong and complex images of God. God in this sample of sermons, and in Black preaching in general, is

²⁴² Sermon 03MNMDX

²⁴³ Sermon 11ULGAL

²⁴⁴ Sermon 04NNNYM

²⁴⁵ Sermon 02BNFLX

fierce, sovereign, and active in history and in all aspects of life; but the preachers are not pushing this image or applying it, for the most part, beyond spiritual and personal themes. On the one hand God is presented as being able to do anything, but on the other God is not being asked or expected to do these things. Essentially, the images of God presented are not explicitly pressing the hearers to think about God's action in every arena or in all dimensions of life, including personal, communal, and societal liberation and struggle; but they do not limit that either.²⁴⁶

Change and Human Action

Because preaching is such a shared practice, it demands a response. In many churches in the African American community, worshippers offer their responses out loud during the sermon itself...however, preachers also pray for responses of other sorts...²⁴⁷

Thomas Hoyt in his discussion of the testimony of preaching reminds us that in most preaching, particularly in the African American community, there is an expectation of a response, both a verbal response within the worship service and a response to “do” or live out what the preacher has outlined in the sermon. In line with this tradition, I analyzed each of the sermons asking questions of what response was elicited; what change or human actions were called for in each sermon. As noted above, in my review of the *UMI* curriculum change and human action are not synonymous; however in the analysis of sermons I found that both fall nicely under the rubric of “response.” This is

²⁴⁶Further analysis could also include asking the questions of “Do these images of God counter the images described by scholars such as Christian Smith, in terms of moralistic therapeutic deism? Is this a God that is distant? Not really involved? Only seen as intervening when we need help? Does this God require anything of young people?”

²⁴⁷ Thomas Hoyt, Jr. “Testimony” in Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 97-98.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, in her discussion of the pillars of Afro-Christian worship, also reiterates the importance of response in African American preaching. Coming from a slightly different perspective, she writes: “The question “will it preach?” is not simply one of form and exegesis; it is also the question of “will the congregation respond in a visible, audible, and meaningful way?”” (Gilkes, 130)

particularly true because the sermons are addressed to individual hearers and are not demanding or calling for changes in communal or societal arenas.²⁴⁸

In reviewing the sermon sample, although all of the sermons called for some type of spiritual or religious response, the preachers are varied in the particular responses they call for. Paralleling the practical and theological themes emphasized in the sermons, over half of the sermons (6 of the 10) called the hearers to *trust God* to work on their behalf, to change their circumstances, to lead them in the correct direction, and to act in due time. Similarly, three of the ten sermons also invited the hearers to *see God in a new way* -- to see God as loving, to see God as capable of wrath, and to see how God is going to do things differently. Two sermons each also call for hearers to *connect with God*, by “getting saved” and joining the church, and to *praise God in advance* of seeing improvements in their lives or of seeing the blessings of God.

In addition to responding in their spiritual practices and faith in God, two sermons called for personal responses, which are not explicitly spiritual in terms of the language used by the preacher.²⁴⁹ These preachers call for personal self improvement – one calls the hearers to take better control of their emotions and the other calls for the hearers to take responsibility for their part in the process of transformation and growth.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ With the exception of one sermon that outlines problems with the African American village/community that have lead to problems in the African American family, the preachers are addressing and calling for personal and interpersonal concerns that can be addressed by individual actions. Furthermore, in this sermon the preacher also calls for individual responses to the communal and systemic issues; he does not press for an overhaul of the systems and structures that have brought about the systemic nature of the problem in the sermon. Instead, he argues that at some point in our history, somebody made a wrong turn and that individual problem created a system of problems. Here his understanding of or explanation of issues in Black families points to some ambiguity around its systemic nature. This could also point to some ambiguity in terms of how to empower/call for the hearers to respond to systemic problems.

²⁴⁹ I am careful and somewhat hesitant to place these two actions in a separated category because the argument can and might be made that all of life is connected with the Spirit of God and therefore it is misleading to separate these actions out as “non-spiritual.” Thus I struggle with the nuance of language and not the specificity of the particular actions called for.

²⁵⁰ Sermons 06NNGAX and 11ULGAL respectively.

Also of note, another preacher calls for interpersonal change and action – in that he encourages his hearers to build better relationships, to become reconciled both to God (as included above) and to one another in the community. His sermon is noteworthy, because while other preachers mention relationships and families in their discussions of issues and narratives, he is the only preacher that calls for interpersonal change and growth (as opposed to calling simply for an individual to change).

Again, looking at the responses called for in the sermons through the lens of fragmented spirituality, I found that the majority of the sermons are calling for spiritual responses – to simply trust God or connect better with God. And the sermons that do call for more practical responses and action focus on individual growth and development. Thus, from this sample of sermons, I see very limited examples of communally or socially active spirituality. Similar to the ways that action and change were called for in the curriculum, the sermons calls for very limited actions.

Perspectives on Adolescents in the Sermons

Looking across the sample, overwhelmingly adolescents are not addressed or even referred to in the sermon. The sermons do not lift up adolescents as active agents or address their concerns. If we look more broadly, three of the ten sermons address *children* as part of larger family units. For example, one preacher refers to “kids” and speaks generally of struggles that children and youth are facing, as part of his discussion of the need to reform African American families. He argues that “Our kids are catching hell, possibly because our villages are broken – based on the African proverb that it takes

a village to raise a child. Gang activity is in all the schools. Our kids are subject to all types of negativity and then they have to come home to a hot mess.”²⁵¹

Another pastor only mentions children in passing, stating "Our children are acting crazy." He includes children in a list of problems and situations that the congregation needs God to work out.²⁵² The final pastor names children as the objects of parental disappointment and the cause of some of the hurt that many parents experience. This pastor admonishes parents to not allow their children to hurt them, offering anecdotes of how parents do not have to harbor negative emotions towards their children – however parents also do not have to respond positively when children ask for material rewards and goods.²⁵³

In these examples children are portrayed as victims of broken villages and as problems that parents have to struggle with; in each example youth are portrayed in a negative or at best problematic light. They are not presented as capable agents or actors in their own lives, but as parts of families that need repair or as causing problems for the presumed adult hearer.²⁵⁴ While the rhetoric of children “stressing out” parents is not extraordinary, it is noteworthy that the only mention of adolescents in the sermons I examined is a negative depiction. From this small sample, one has to wonder about the prevalence of this practice across African American churches and about the larger effects

²⁵¹ Sermon 10BNTXX.

²⁵² Sermon 03MNMDX

²⁵³ Sermon 06NNGAX.

²⁵⁴ There is one exception to this negative depiction of children and youth. One pastor offers an anecdote of his 3 year old son who often thought he had more strength than he had. The pastor uses the story about his son to demonstrate the ways that humans are often stubborn, thinking we can do more than we are capable of, getting angry when others offer help, and limiting progress, until God steps in. The narrative ends with the pastor (representing the loving Father and God) figures out how to allow his son to hold onto his backpack, which is way too heavy for him (maintaining his sense of self and strength), while picking both the son and the backpack up, thus enabling them to progress out of the house.

This narrative is not a clear indication of how adolescents are viewed in the sermon sample; however, it offers the least negative view of children and youth. For it at least demonstrates attempts towards agency by children.

on the self-concept of youth, as well as the ministry possibilities for youth in churches that primarily view or present youth as negative or problematic issues that need miraculous intervention. In a sense, this lack of positive discussion may also speak to or represent the growing gap between adults and youth, and in turn between the adult led congregations and youth. Discussing larger concerns about the lack of the church's involvement in the policies that affect children and youth, Luther Smith writes that "Fundamental to closing the gap [between children/youth and adults] is building relationships between adults and the children on whose behalf they witness. Children cannot be reduced to statistics, issues and problems. Such a reduction makes children an abstraction, and presenting children as an abstraction is a form of dehumanization."²⁵⁵

Race and Ethnicity²⁵⁶

In contrast to the *Urban Ministry, Inc* curriculum, which has a founding mission to create culturally relevant educational resources, sermons in the African American community do not *explicitly* have this goal at the heart of their purpose.²⁵⁷ Whereas one can assume that preaching and teaching in an African American context (or to a predominately African American audience) affects the content of the messages; in terms of an explicit discussion of race or ethnicity the sermon sample does not directly support

²⁵⁵ Luther Smith, "When Celebrating Children is not Enough" in Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright, eds. *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2008), 28.

²⁵⁶ Is there any discussion of race or ethnicity in the sermon? If so, how? How are African Americans discussed in the curriculum?

²⁵⁷ Please see the above quote from Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 175 that outlines the myriad purposes and functions of sermons within African American churches. In their list (while they do not claim that it is exhaustive), they do not outline or indicate that discussing issues pertaining to African American culture or race is a primary part of the sermon. However, in the text immediately preceding the quote Lincoln and Mamiya assert that "Sermon content may well be one of the indicators most revealing of black consciousness" (175).

this assumption.²⁵⁸ In other words, only 2 of the 10 sermons explicitly mention race or ethnicity; of these two sermons only one preacher presents race or issues facing the African American community as a primary point of discussion.²⁵⁹ In his sermon, the preacher discusses many issues facing “Black families,” he offers examples of the ways that Black families, Black men and women, and Black children are in need of healing. The preacher also discusses issues in the African American community and posits that “Somewhere, Black folks made a wrong turn and now we are seeing the results in our families.”²⁶⁰

In contrast to naming issues in the black community, the second preacher makes references to and tells stories from her Jamaican heritage. In a call and response manner, she notes that there are many Jamaicans in the congregation she is addressing. And while social and communal issues concerning this ethnic group are not the primary focus of her sermon, this social cultural location (and an attention to race and ethnicity) is evident in parts of her theology. For example, in discussing the importance of remembering what God has done, she reminds the congregation that many of them know who God is and

²⁵⁸ I must be clear that in my analysis, I am describing only occurrences of verbal discussions of race or ethnicity, I am not in any way attempting to attend to particularities and cultural nuances or the performative elements of preaching that also have been characterized as indicative of African American preaching.

For in looking at the performative elements, such as call and response, particular nuances of language, elements of the shout/hoop/holla, each of the sermons reflects these elements of Black preaching. However, beyond the form of black preaching the content does not necessarily reflect a particular or intentional discussion of race and ethnicity.

²⁵⁹ Sermon 10BNTXX, In addition to noting that this sermon is from a historically black Baptist church, the church is one of the more well established churches in the sample. It was founded over 22 years ago and despite its national prominence, concentrates substantial resources on local community development and outreach. The church also stands in contrast to some of the other churches in the sample, in that it includes explicitly Africentric elements in its physical plant and worship space. For example, the church has an African ankh in the sanctuary.

²⁶⁰ Sermon 10BNTXX. [Here I am paraphrasing his sermon.] As part of the consent process, I agreed to not use direct quotes from the sermons and/or to reveal the identifying data of the preachers, when presenting individual examples.

have evidence based on God bringing their families safely from other countries and blessing them to become established in the U.S.²⁶¹

While my sample is too small to represent trends across the African American religious landscape, the limited role of race and ethnicity in the sermon sample content remains perplexing and warrants further investigation. For example, my sample may both parallel trends *and* indicate some divergence from an earlier study of African American religious practices conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya. Lincoln and Mamiya, in their discussion of “black consciousness” among African American preachers since the civil rights movement, noted that 64.3 percent of the clergy surveyed in the 1980s responded affirmatively to the question: “Do your sermons reflect any of the changes in black consciousness (black pride, black is beautiful, black power, etc.) since the civil rights movement?”²⁶² However, they also note correlations between the age, denomination, and educational level of clergy and their inclusion of Black consciousness material. The most significant difference was between denominations—for example Lincoln and Mamiya noted that Methodist clergy showed a slightly higher positive response than Baptist clergy (72.5 percent versus 64.2 percent); however Pentecostals were significantly less positive in their responses (46.2 percent).²⁶³

²⁶¹Sermon 04NNNYM. I do not want to gloss over the significant differences between mentioning immigrant status and simply mentioning race in America – these are not one in the same. However, I must attend to the fact that in explicitly naming Jamaicans and West Indians, she is explicitly attending to elements of race, ethnicity, and culture in her sermon.

²⁶² Lincoln and Mamiya, 169. The authors note that their “study is one of the first systematic empirical attempts to begin charting the influence of the black consciousness movement upon the black clergy since the civil rights period.” They argue that “Given their strong leadership role in the African American congregations, we assumed that this clerical elite will have an influence upon lay members through their sermons, personal theology, and educational methods. Our study was limited to the views of the clergy, and a further examination of the views of the congregational members needs to be done in the future.” (167)

²⁶³Ibid, 175-176.

It is important to note that Lincoln and Mamiya surveyed preachers across a range of historically black denominations (including Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostals), and thus their sample may not reflect the more recent preponderance of non-denominational charismatic movements within the African American community; of which, my sample includes four non-denominational churches and one church affiliated with a mainline protestant denomination.²⁶⁴ My sample also represents clergy and sermon content almost twenty years after Lincoln and Mamiya's seminal work. In light of this, one can only begin to predict the differences that may be inherent in non-denominational churches, which often have roots in charismatic, evangelical traditions (often associated with Pentecostal denominations).

However, even in noting the impact of the civil rights movement on the consciousness of black preachers in the 1980s, Lincoln and Mamiya were careful to note that "this should not obscure the fact that an evangelical gospel largely unconcerned with racial matters still has a strong following among at least one-third of the pastors of the historic black denominations."²⁶⁵

Thus the lack of a significant discussion of race or ethnicity within the sermons, while not aligning with the percent of clergy in the 1980s who claim that their sermons reflect black consciousness, does press us to further explore the ways that African American religious communities are presently viewing the significance of race and ethnicity in their ministry.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Therefore, in looking solely among the churches in Historically Black denominations (of which my sample does not include any historically black Pentecostals), I still only found that one of the sermons discussed race and ethnicity explicitly.

²⁶⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, 176

²⁶⁶ It will also be necessary in a larger study to attend to the ways that particular churches self-identify. For example, I chose my sample based on the demographics of the congregation and the race of the preacher. However, a church that is predominately African American and has an African American

Collective Trends

Summary of Findings

Theological and Practical Themes: *Personal Theology – Possible Fragmentation*

The theological and practical themes of the UMI curriculum focus on personal and interpersonal issues—emphasizing the ways that God cares for individuals and calls humans to remain faithful. However this curriculum does not emphasize engagement in communal and social justice issues (practically or theologically). At best it offers a minimal engagement of communal and social justice issues. Similarly, the sermons covered a variety of theological and practical themes, but also tended to emphasize personal, interpersonal, and religious themes over and above communal and societal issues. While the sermons tended to be more theologically complex than the UMI curriculum (offering a wider variety of theological themes and subthemes), the curriculum offered more examples of practical communal issues than the sermon sample. This skewing towards the personal and religious indicates a tendency to limit the understanding of what is important theologically, and can in turn point to some fragmentation, if youth fully embrace the lessons in the curriculum and sermons.

Understandings of God: *God acts in many and varied ways...*

Similar to the variety of themes presented in the sermons and curriculum, these resources offer myriad examples of how God acts and relates to humanity and the world.

pastor may not self-identity as a black church. One example of this is Creflo Dollar's ministry which is described as a much more global ministry that emphasizes its connection with Christ above and beyond any racial, ethnic affiliation.

Also, because both the curricula and sermons offer a strong emphasis on scripture, we see a wealth of diverse, biblical metaphors and descriptions of God. In this way, God's action is not limited to any one arena in the scriptural texts; however, the exegesis of the scriptures and the connections between how God is acting in scripture and in the lives of contemporary humans is not a direct one. Holding the scriptures and resources together, God is active in the lives of individuals and communities. Also due to the heavy incorporation of Hebrew Bible texts, God is described as acting in and through nations and governments. However, the curriculum and sermons, as noted above did not equally emphasize the diversity of God's actions. Instead God was described as primarily involved in the lives of individual persons—calling, correcting, transforming, and using individual people. Thus, the understandings of God presented are complex—drawing upon the complicated resources of scripture *and* skewed towards the personal in the applications. In other words, the sermons and curricula offer youth examples and images of a very active and demanding God that works in many ways and areas. However the youth in many cases will have to interpret the scriptures for themselves in order to apply or see practical examples of how God can move in arenas beyond the personal or communal.²⁶⁷

Change and Actions Called For: *Exercise Your Faith and Think about Acting*

In addition to the theological and practical content of the educational resources within African American churches, I also assessed the ways that these theological themes

²⁶⁷ This confirms and connects with Evelyn Parker's earlier findings, in that she noted that the students she interviewed had most of the elements of a robust and complex faith, but still struggled to put it all together.

connected with and elicited human action and responses. Assessing both the actions and changes called for in the UMI curriculum, I found that overwhelmingly the concept of change in action or behavior was absent. However, the curriculum did call for two types of actions: religious and reflective action. Likewise the responses called for in the sermons were also religious. The sermons and curricula called humans to trust God and connect with God better. The few sermons that called for practical changes only called for individual growth. A small minority of the lessons encouraged youth to act in their communities. However, across these resources, for the most part the religious education resources and sermons are not pushing for active responses to the lessons beyond individual religious growth. If this sample is any indication of the trends in the larger African American church community, then it shows a definite lack of emphasis on a spirituality that balances or integrates both personal, individual development with communal and societal action.

View of Adolescents: *Youth as Active Agents of Change or Youth as Problems*

One of the major factors in empowering youth and ameliorating fragmentation among adolescent spiritually is connected with the ways that youth are encouraged to act (their agency) and to see themselves (their identity). For example, it would be easier for youth to imagine God calling them to work to affect change in the political arena, if youth were invited, encouraged, and offered role models of young people working in public and political arenas (participating in a protest or acts of civil disobedience, starting campaigns, raising funds, making phone calls for a local candidate, etc.). Thus it was important to better understand how the educational content of African American churches

presents youth, and by extension encourages youth in their self image and understanding. The UMI lessons include many positive portrayals of youth as actively involved and working.²⁶⁸ Over 40% of the lessons portray youth taking positive action and as capable of action. However, the sermons are in direct contrast with the primarily positive portrayal of youth in the Sunday school lessons. For the most part, the sermons do not discuss adolescents at all; and when discussions of children as parts of families are included, the sermons present children and youth among the many things that adults have to struggle with or that the adults are constantly praying to God to help them with.

Looking collectively at the educational resources, we see that within the African American church educational traditions youth are potentially receiving mixed messages—depending on the setting. While it is encouraging for youth to see and receive positive feedback about who they are in age appropriate Sunday school classes—it undermines this work if in the primarily adult spaces, youth are only seen as negative, passive, or never acting in ways that benefit themselves and their community. This limited agency attributed to the youth in sermons is problematic and can potentially lead to negative or limited understandings of all that youth are capable of accomplishing in their communities.

Race and Ethnicity: *Do we need to talk about race in Black sermons for Black people?*

In addition to assessing the ways that the educational resources addressed theological and practical issues, and even adolescents, I also attempted to address the

²⁶⁸As noted above, one lesson describes a young woman giving her older clothes to a family in need, another describes a young man showing compassion to a homeless man; while, others depict youth as organizing events in their schools and churches.

ways that issues of race, ethnicity, and racism were discussed. Building upon Parker's earlier findings that youth did not talk about race or racism in the same ways that they discussed their relationships and understandings of God, I looked at the discussions of race and ethnicity to ascertain what models of discussing race and racism youth were receiving in the educational resources of African American churches. The majority of the sermons did not include a discussion of race, ethnicity, or racism. Only two of the sermons (20%) mentioned race and ethnicity. And as noted above, while race and ethnicity are evidenced in some of the style and structure of the sermons, in looking solely at the content of the sermons, youth find minimal emphasis on race or ethnicity. In this way, one can presume that discussing race or ethnicity in sermons is either not done, not acceptable, or not important. On the other hand, this lack of discussions of race not only points to the possibility of fragmenting issues of race and racism from religion (as presented in sermons), but it also leaves youth to develop methods for thinking and talking about race, ethnicity, and racism outside of the religious arena.

Even as the Sunday school curriculum offers more inclusion of race and ethnicity because of the inclusion of Black imagery and historical figures in the lesson materials, only 16% of the subsample included an explicit discussion of race, racism or ethnicity. Unlike the sermons, where ethnicity and race were only mentioned in passing or in descriptions of the community, the lessons included African American history, accounts of dealing with racism in the media and publishing, and called youth to reflect on how racism in aspects of media was prevalent still. Therefore, looking together we see that the educational resources do not discuss race or racism the majority of the time. However, it

appears that the UMI curriculum is doing a better job of offering youth models of discussing race, racism, and ethnicity in relationships to their faith.

Evidence of Fragmentation?

In this chapter, I have briefly analyzed a sample of two educational resources within African American churches: sermons and Sunday school curricula. While neither sample is large enough to offer statistically significant results or to predict trends for the entire African American Christian religious community, the samples give us a snapshot of some trends within educational resources in some Black churches.

The combined sermon and curriculum data demonstrate that, among this sample, African American churches are offering youth limited theological and practical diversity, in that there is an overwhelming silence with regards to communal and societal issues and understandings of how God currently is involved in these areas. While the inclusion of such issues does not in and of itself signal an integrated spirituality; the exclusion of such emphasis raises several flags. Similarly the resources do not encourage youth to respond in diverse manners or arenas; again the primary emphasis is on the spiritual and the personal.

The emphasis on the religious and personal/interpersonal in terms of explicit content, coupled with inconsistent images of African American youth and a lack of engagement of race and ethnicity (let alone tough social justice issues such as racism) pushes me to believe that the fragmented spirituality of African American youth, as noted in the previous chapters and in earlier research, is not simply a symptom of adolescent

development or choice, but may be a by-product of the educational resources presented in African American churches.

Curriculum and Sermon Analysis Schema

Category	General Description
Personal	The <i>personal</i> addresses the actions of individual people to change, tweak, reflect upon, their personal lives. This can include actions that lead to personal behavioral changes such as: eating better, exercising, dressing a certain way, being honest, studying, aspiring for personal success like getting a good job, not having sex, abstaining from alcohol, drugs, etc.
Interpersonal	The <i>interpersonal</i> addresses the interactions of two individual persons. This includes actions that affect relationships, such as: learning to respect parents/teachers, treating a neighbor/stranger well, learning to get along with friends, learning how to be in romantic relationships, learning how to deal with the loss of a relationship, and even dealing with issues of popularity or acceptance (in small groups). While this does affect small group dynamics, I would typically classify this as dealing with one-to-one interactions and interactions that impact individuals directly.
Communal	The <i>communal</i> addresses actions/themes that take place and are geared toward a larger community. The communal can include communities such as churches, schools, local governments, neighborhoods, local organizations (e.g. YMCA). The communal is also somewhat hard to pin down in terms of the types of actions and changes affected because they can be the actions of individuals that impact a wider community and it can include the collective action of an organization that impacts changes. (e.g. the communal can include both an individual city council person working to get better afterschool programs, and it can include a group of youth from the boys and girls club working to raise funds for a needy family or to do a neighborhood cleanup.)
Societal	The <i>societal</i> deals with actions that take place in and are targeted toward society at large. This level includes policy decisions and efforts to advocate for social and systemic change. These actions can include involvement in the political and legislative process (voting, registering persons to vote, writing letters to politicians, working in lobbyist groups and other nonprofits that go to the Capitol or other state and federal law making bodies, etc.); it includes protesting and advocacy of issues that affect individuals and the entire society (eg. protesting the death penalty, by working to get Troy Davis a new trial). Actions typical of this level include lobbying, protesting, writing, voting, running for office, campaigning, and tend to take place in the political arena. However, this level can also include a global component – of working to affect international systems (such as protesting the war in Iraq, the occupation of Palestine, as well as working to provide AIDS/HIV education and to get governments to stop developing policies that only worsen the pandemic, etc.) Working on human rights campaigns.

This schema outlines the level on which change/action takes place. My analysis also connects this schema with the types of actions/changes that called for.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ This analysis schema draws upon other schemas that analyze the types of change and transformation that people and institutions can go through/make. In particular I am indebted to Ronald Ferguson, Kennedy School of Government. In assessing the levels and locations of action of youth development organizations, he starts at the 0 level and works up, notating 0-Grassroots Organizing, 1-Schools/Local direct service agencies (such as clubs, community centers, tutoring programs afterschool), 2-Local Government agencies (the ones that offer oversight or funding for direct service agencies, DYS, City Council, School Board, etc.), 3-State, 4 –Federal (where laws are made that dictate the types of programs or funding that can be provided to support youth, also this MACRO level must include national heads of major organizations, such as the National boards of Big Brother Big Sister and national think tank organizations, such as the Annie Casey Foundation, etc.) I am further indebted to the Women’s Theological Center’s curriculum development team that developed another schema that looks at the type of individual and communal change that people and institutions make.

Chapter Five: Fragmentation in Context

Exploring Dimensions of Fragmentation in Society

Psychological Dimensions of Fragmentation and Fragmented Spirituality

The concept of fragmentation in religious identity or fragmented selves is not limited to African American adolescents. Fragmentation in relationship to spirituality, identity, and selfhood is evidenced in early psychology of religion texts. Looking at the early 20th century writings of William James and W. E. B. Du Bois, we see discussions of many elements of fragmentation or a division within what they refer to as the *soul*. For example, William James in his lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience* outlined the religion of the “healthy-minded,” the “sick soul,” and the “*divided self*.”²⁷⁰ James argued that the sick-soul, also characterized as twice-born, had a psychological basis of “certain discordancy or heterogeneity...an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution.”²⁷¹ James saw the sick soul as an example of the *divided self* in that there was a split between the natural and the spiritual lives in the sick-soul temperament. James gave examples of this divided self, in religious terms and figures, such as St. Paul when he wrote “what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.”²⁷² James saw the divided self as a type of self loathing or inability to get one’s passions and intellect in line, but he also argued that the divided self could undergo a process of unification.²⁷³

Emphasizing more social psychological dimensions, in *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois traced the evolution of Negro religion in America and named two distinctive social

²⁷⁰ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experiences*. (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002 [1902]), 78-188

²⁷¹ William James, 167.

²⁷² Quoted in James, 171

²⁷³ James, 175-183. While, I am not affirming James’ understanding of the *divided self*, nor utilizing it as a major theoretical lens through which to view fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents, I find it significant to lift up his work as an example of the ways that fragmentation and division of souls/self/personality have been connected with religious temperaments and experiences, historically.

psychological and religious temperaments. He articulated this as a dichotomy between the slave's religion and the freedman's religion, or later as the southern and the northern Negro's religion.²⁷⁴ For Du Bois, the slave's religion was characterized by a Christianity of submission and resignation, which suited the inner struggles of slaves and pointed toward otherworldly freedom. On the other hand Du Bois characterized the freedmen's religion as a darker, radical, more intense religion with a note of revenge.²⁷⁵

Du Bois describes the Northern radical and Southern compromising temperaments as a response to the social conditions in America and as a response to the Negro's social psychological experience of "double consciousness":

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One

²⁷⁴ Du Bois also interchangeably spoke of religion as the inner ethical life.

²⁷⁵ Du Bois recognized the radical nature of the Freedman's or Northern Negroes' ethical strivings:

Conscious of his impotence, and pessimistic, he often becomes bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith. On the other hand, another type of mind, shrewder and keener and more tortuous too, sees in the very strength of the anti-negro movement its patent weaknesses...and is deterred by no ethical considerations in the endeavor to turn this weakness into the black man's strength. Thus we have two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings; the danger of one lies in anarchy, that of the other in hypocrisy. The one type of Negro stands almost ready to curse God and die, and the other is too often found a traitor to right and a coward before force; the one is wedded to ideals remote, whimsical, perhaps impossible of realization; the other forgets that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment. (146-147)

Du Bois is critical of both temperaments. He is weary of the radical nature of the northern Negro, in that it often leads to bitterness when even as one becomes educated and one's mind is expanded, one is better able to see the limitations of one's power and the inability to affect change. He is equally weary of the Southern Negro who recognizes that only by lying and deceiving is there any opportunity for economic growth or advancement. In a sense the southern Negro had to both lie to him/herself as well as perform for his/her employer (e.g. Ex-master). Du Bois, describing the condition of the southern Negro, wrote:

To-day the young Negro of the South who would succeed cannot be frank and outspoken, honest and self-assertive, but rather he is daily tempted to be silent and wary, politic and sly; he must flatter and be pleasant, endure petty insults with a smile, shut his eyes to wrong; in too many cases he sees positive personal advantage in deception and lying. His real thoughts, his real aspirations, must be guarded in whispers; he must not criticize, he must not complain. Patience, humility, and adroitness must, in these growing black youth, replace impulse, manliness, and courage. With this sacrifice there is an economic opening, and perhaps peace and some prosperity. Without this there is riot, migration, or crime. (147-148)

ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²⁷⁶

Discussing the psychological and religious implications of the double-consciousness and living the double life, Du Bois writes: “Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.”²⁷⁷

Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness is informative in thinking about fragmentation in general, for he illumines how fragmentation permeates from and/or creates a duality in terms of not only identity (how African Americans saw/see themselves), but also in terms of loyalties and actions. His example of fragmented consciousness explores the way that African Americans attempted to make sense of and hold together difficult and conflicting visions of the Black self in light of their experiences of injustice and thwarted efforts.²⁷⁸

Although I would not describe any of the youth interviewed as struggling in the negative extremes which Du Bois and James describe,²⁷⁹ Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness and the resultant variations in religious responses beg the question of

²⁷⁶ Du Bois, 8.

²⁷⁷ Du Bois, 146.

²⁷⁸ My understanding of adolescent spiritual fragmentation does not rely upon the notion that Black youth are struggling to hold together dueling notions of their selfhood, but it does appear that they are attempting to hold together dueling understandings of God. And that they are in an often unconscious struggle to make sense of (or not think about) the ways that what they purport to believe about God is not working in their lives.

²⁷⁹ For both James and Du Bois describe the experiences of the divided self and double consciousness as a warring in one’s inner thoughts that caused one to struggle to remain whole or even sane. James the heterogeneous personality of the divided self, writing: “Their spirit wars with their flesh, they wish for incompatibles, wayward impulses interrupt their most deliberate plans, and their lives are one long drama of repentance and of effort to repair misdemeanors and mistakes... [Here referring to St. Augustine]... finally how, distracted by the struggle between the two souls in his breast, and ashamed of his own weakness of will, when so many others whom he knew and knew of had thrown off the shackles of sensuality...” (James, p. 169-171)

whether or how fragmentation among African American adolescents also illumines a response to and a critique of the world around them.

Even though the youth do not demonstrate any type of psychopathology (as James might espouse in discussing the sick soul or divided self), nor are they tending towards extreme hypocrisy or radicalism (as Du Bois describes the extreme religious responses of double-consciousness), their interviews highlight other examples of fragmentation. Their interviews offer many examples of the ways that what they believe *should be* true about the world does not fit nicely with what they experience in the world. In other words, in most cases their interviews demonstrate a gap between their ideals and their experiences.²⁸⁰ For example, Kira's experience with violence in her community could not be reconciled with the responses of her principal and teachers. For Kira, violence was a very serious and troubling situation that affected her own sense of self and safety; and it called for adults who were concerned and engaged in helping youth grieve and combat the circumstances that lead to the violence. However, Kira experienced a principal who was ill equipped to address violence and a grieving community of youth, and who was also caught in the tension of responding to the needs of the community and maintaining a

²⁸⁰ I am intentional to reiterate that *in most cases* there is incongruence between the ideals and experiences of the youth. This tension is helpful in that it points to the ways that youth have not become complacent with their negative experiences and are still able to determine when/if situations do not meet their expectations. However, the interviews do not give evidence that youth feel empowered to act upon some of their complaints or concerns. In some ways the interviews served as an intervention – helping youth themselves become more aware of the incongruence in their lives and pushing them to ask more questions of their surroundings and community members.

Even though the purpose of the interviews is to obtain more information concerning the spirituality of youth, James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* and Joyce Mercer and Dori Baker, *Lives to Offer* point to the ways that the interview process of intentional and deep listening to the voices and concerns of youth in many ways serves to empower youth (beyond the agenda of information gathering initially sought by the researcher).

However, I am aware that not all of the youth demonstrate this incongruence, for many youth have complaints about their lives, cities, schools, etc. but a few do not *really* expect that anything should be different – and in most cases I argue that they cannot imagine how things would/could be different and thus they resign themselves to the notion that this is the way that things will remain.

positive image for an already struggling school.²⁸¹ Similarly, Dana's experience of her community as being a place where each person just individually worked on themselves did not mesh with her conviction that people should come together to make a difference around specific concerns. Like Kira, Dana experiences a conflict in how she sees herself – based on her inner convictions and based on the expectations of her community members (which may also include expectations of her parents, teachers, and society to strive towards individual middle class success).

Fragmentation and Identity Development

In addition to the ways that Du Bois' understanding of double consciousness demonstrates a historical parallel for fragmentation, fragmentation is also a characteristic feature of adolescent psychological and social development in general. An exploration of this feature points to and undergirds the potential for fragmentation in terms of selfhood, identity and even loyalties and actions among African American youth. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness points to the tension between the social forces in African American lives and the efforts of African Americans to hold together the different worlds in which they live. Similarly, developmental theorists recognize a tension between the multiple forces in individuals' lives and the efforts of these individuals to hold together diverse influences. Both social and psychological theorists recognize a dynamic movement between the existential reality of multiple forces and the existential longing for integration. Their descriptions and explanations vary but, taken together, they illumine the nature of fragmentation and the potential of integrated/integrating spirituality.

²⁸¹ Kira's Interview Transcript.

At the heart of human development in general and adolescence in particular is the crisis of identity versus role confusion. Here we see that Erikson defines identity as the ideal, which can be undercut if multiple social forces produce role confusion. Drawing on the work of Erik Erikson, human and faith developmental theorist James Fowler writes,

By identity I mean an accrued awareness of oneself that maintains continuity with one's past meanings to others and to oneself and that integrates the images of oneself given by significant others with one's own inner feelings of who one is and of what one can do, all in such a way as to enable one to anticipate the future without undue anxiety about "losing" oneself. Identity, thought of in this way, is by no means a fully conscious matter. But when it is present it gives rise to a feeling of inner firmness or of "being together" as a self. It communicates to others a sense of personal unity or integration.²⁸²

Accordingly, the catalyst for this crisis of identity versus role confusion is the adolescent's new found capacity for mutual interpersonal perspective taking.²⁸³ Adolescents recognize and incorporate into their being and identity the perspectives of others (be they true or imagined perspectives); in turn adolescents become susceptible to the "tyranny of they." In this tyranny of "they," adolescents can become so caught up in the expectations of their significant others that they feel trapped, become incapable of choosing which voices will influence them, or struggle to filter out the unreasonable expectations of others. James W. Fowler summarizes this new capacity for perspective taking in the couplet, "I see you seeing me, I see the me I think you see."²⁸⁴

From the perspective of African American adolescents, this "tyranny of they" takes on another dimension; in addition to being cognizant of the opinions of one's peers,

²⁸² James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 77.

I draw on Erikson's original writings in other parts of this chapter; however I found Fowler's summary of the tasks and outcomes of Erikson's theory of identity development to be most helpful in starting the conversation on how identity development connects with spirituality among adolescents.

²⁸³ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 72. Here Fowler refers to the work of Lawrence Kohlberg on moral development and Robert Selman's work on perspective taking in interpersonal relationships, as he outlines the foundation for his stage theory of faith.

²⁸⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 72-73.

teachers or parents, African American teens also become cognizant of the communal and societal stereotypes and expectations associated with being a Black person. At this point Black teens struggle to come to terms with what they see others believing and thinking about them—not personally but as a part of a group. Further emphasizing this point, educator Janie Ward expands the notion of the crisis of identity versus role confusion to include a crisis of both identity and ideology. Ward points to the fact that identity development involves more than just coming to know one’s self, but is intricately interwoven with learning to know what one believes about one’s self in an effort to reject what others believe about you.

Identity (knowing who you are) and ideology (knowing what you believe) are critical to developmental processes in adolescence. Teenagers are consumed with these issues. For Black youth, moving beyond an internalization of racial subservience to racial pride begins first with a conscious confrontation with one’s racial identity. Resolution of this so-called identity crisis of youth requires that all teenagers proclaim “I am not” as the first step to defining what “I am.” At the threshold stage of the identity process, black teenagers..., who are all too familiar with the demeaning stereotypes held about [them] and [their] racial group, must add, “I am not what you believe black people to be, *and I am black.*”²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵Janie Victoria Ward, *The Skin We’re In* (New York: Fireside, 2000), 126. Recognizing that so much of adolescent development and meaning making comes from internalizing the beliefs and values of their “significant others,” Ward opens the way for us to see the powerful role that the church/youth pastors/religious organizations/centers of values can have in shaping adolescent values/identity. In noting the role of ideology and identity she also opens the space to make a harsh critique of what we as religious practitioners are not doing.

Anecdotally, some of my earliest understandings of who I was and how I should view myself were connected with an understanding that I was “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God and that “God made me and God don’t make no junk” and hearing/reciting “I am somebody” with Jesse Jackson. All of these mantras are part of my parents reflecting back to me positive images of who I was in Christ and who I was as a black person. Most of these lessons were instilled when I was a young child, but they were reiterated by many subsequent transformative role models and experiences. For example, in middle school (early adolescence) I went to a school with more African American students and teachers. In 6th grade, I had 3 African American teachers, my first in-school course on Black history, participated in a Black history month program, learned how to dance from my classmates, and for the first time had a best friend. (This was the first time that I had been in a school with another African American female student in my same grade and class.)

In the previous chapter, we looked at the ways that youth were portrayed in educational materials in the African American community – pointing to the fact that youth can be empowered to live, act, and believe in particular ways according to the images and models that are reflected back to them. This earlier assertion draws on the fact that within adolescence, youth are developing the capacity for mutual

Fowler's recapitulation of Erikson's identity development theory and Janie Ward's discussion of the added dimensions of the identity crisis of African American youth point to the ways that the totality of identity development is connected with one's ability to *integrate*, and not fragment, one's myriad life experiences, the opinions of others, and one's self understanding. This focus on integration as the goal of identity development have lead many theorists to misinterpret Erikson's work—arguing that he is calling for a much “firmer” or fixed sense of self than possible. However, Fowler notes that the process of identity development and integration is not a conscious process, for the most part, but does empower adolescents to anticipate and plan for future events, as well as communicate to others a sense of integration. In this way, the process(es) of identity formation, particularly as connected with one's spirituality and faith, is a process of integration, or at least attempting to hold multiple and often competing pieces and voices together. Thus at many points in the process, if the youth “fails” to integrate or make sense of various pieces and experiences unresolved anxiety around the myriad opinions or experiences of their lives; then fragmentation is possible.

Although there remains much discussion of identity formation and how one defines *identity*, let alone achieves a sense of identity; one aspect that most theorists can agree on is that the resolution of this crisis in adolescence does *not* result in a coherent and unchanging identity for all time. Instead it requires ongoing integration and processing:

interpersonal perspective taking. This capacity makes youth more open and susceptible to the views and images others have of them. Therefore, I assert that it becomes even more essential for youth to both see examples of other youth working and living in certain ways, participating in the life of the church and community in meaningful ways, but also for youth to receive specific and generic feedback on how they are viewed and valued in the community, the church, and by God.

Contrary to popular misinterpretations of [Erikson's] identity development theory, identity is not the culmination of a key event or a series of events, although key events can play an important role in the larger process. In fact, it is not the culmination of anything. It is rather, the lived experience of ongoing process—the process of *integrating* successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications, and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation of who we are. *Identity is the embodiment of self-understanding*. We are who we understand ourselves to be, as that understanding is shaped and lived out in everyday experience.²⁸⁶

In the quote above, educational theorist Michael Nakkula attempts to summarize the ambiguous and process oriented nature of identity and identity formation. He reiterates that identity formation is NOT something which adolescents work out once and for all. Nakkula points us back to some of Erikson's earliest articulations of the psychological and social dimensions of identity formation, where he writes: "The process [of identity formation] is always changing and developing: at its best it is a process of increasing individuation and it becomes ever more inclusive as the individual grows aware of a widening circle of others significant to him... identity is never 'established' as an 'achievement' in the form of a personality armor, or of anything static and unchangeable"²⁸⁷ Therefore, in looking at Fowler, Nakkula, and Erikson we see that adolescent identity formation entails an ongoing, never static process of integration and moving towards an inner sense of "firmness".

However, in noting that the process is never "established" or never fully realized – what then does fragmentation of identity look like, or is it problematic? In my understanding fragmentation of identity or an inability to integrate one's identity can result in undue anxiety about one's future, but in most cases I see it as resulting in a

²⁸⁶Michael Nakkula, "Identity and Possibility," in *Adolescents at School*, ed. Michael Sadowski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 7-8, emphasis added.

²⁸⁷Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994 [1968]), 23-24.

limitation to draw upon the wealth of resources available to oneself. For example, in the above interviews, as well as in the earlier data from Evelyn Parker, fragmentation or fractured spirituality can be highly functional; yet it is not fully adequate. More specifically, fragmentation can result in students who are unable to see within themselves and their communities the resources to address the issues of concern to them and by extension to fully develop as they work through those concerns.

Populated and Plural Selves

Discussions of identity and its relation to multiple social forces have become more complex since Erikson did his original work. Of particular interest are the discussions of populated and plural selves, which recognize the possibility that people can hold diverse forces together without losing the complexity and multiplicity that these forces bear. People can hold together plural selves in an integrated fashion.

Erikson had his own ways of embracing such complexity, largely by making connections between the individual's life and the communities and contexts in which the individual lives. Erikson argued, for example, that "in discussing identity...we cannot separate personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate...the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other."²⁸⁸ He thus alluded to the myriad ways that communal and societal changes throughout history also affect the ways that adolescents come to understand and form their identities. Much recent scholarship has attempted to complexify these ideas still further. Both empirical and theoretical research have added texture to Erikson's claims as people seek to address issues of post-modernity and the increased voices and spheres of influence that people now face..

²⁸⁸ Erikson, 23.

Going beyond a mere re-articulation of how identity development and contemporary crises in history are interacting, many scholars have also attempted to offer an expanded understanding of the self and human identity all together. For example, Kenneth Gergen describes the interconnection of technological advancement and a culture of saturation. His work *The Saturated Self* outlines the evolution of the self from a romantic to modern, and then to a post-modern or saturated self.²⁸⁹ Each of these understandings of the self reflects and attends to the paralleling changes in society at that historical point. Gergen's understanding of the romanticist view is that it saw the core of the human as "his" soul, as driven by passions and genius: This contrasted with the modernist view of the self that saw the essence of man as rationality.²⁹⁰ In his description of these perspectives on the self in history, he notes that the idea of the autonomous self was an invention of the 18th century and further points to the idea that psychology has never been value free.²⁹¹ In reviewing the prevalence of modernist theories of the self, he notes that psychology created norms and pathologies based on the assumption that a person should be autonomous and coherent. In moving toward a post-modern understanding of the self, Gergen argues that humans are experiencing a "populating of the self." Gergen's major thesis is that "immersion" into a wider variety of social worlds—being exposed to an enormous range or saturation of information, relationships, and even feelings, leads humans to "the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being."²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self*. (New York: Basic, 2000 [1991])

²⁹⁰ Gergen, 19.

²⁹¹ Gergen, 11. He writes: "Many historians find the Western preoccupation with the unique individual both extreme and restricting. How did our culture come to place such importance on individual selves? In one fascinating account of the development, John Lyons proposes that the centrality of the self was largely a product of late-eighteenth-century thought."

²⁹² Gergen, 69

In his introduction to the 2000 edition, Gergen adds a corrective to his earlier assumptions about the positive potential of a “saturated self”. Originally Gergen argued that the loss of what was assumed to be the “true self” could set the stage for “moving beyond the individualist tradition” and would empower humans to realize the tremendous significance of relationships for our lives.²⁹³ In 2000, Gergen modifies his original assertion; while still holding out hope for relational selves, he notes that he underestimated the alternative which included “the fusion of people not with one another, but with material.”²⁹⁴ Gergen was unprepared for the ways that the distinctions between humans and machines would become lessened and the ways that technology would become more fused with human functions (such as contact lenses and microscopes for sight, etc.)²⁹⁵

Gergen further argues that “as social saturation adds incrementally to the population of self, each impulse toward well-formed identity is cast into increasing doubt; each is found absurd, shallow, limited, or flawed by the onlooking audience of the interior.”²⁹⁶ He also describes a more extreme, or negative effect of social saturation: *multiphrenia*. *Multiphrenia* is “the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments,” which has the potential to lead to what Gergen calls the *Vertigo of the Valued*. This occurs because the more freedoms one has the more responsibilities one has; and thus, we have to recognize that with each new relationship there comes new

²⁹³ Gergen, xix.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ In 2000, Gergen is writing before the boom of social networking, but in some ways his understanding of technology, social saturation, and relational selves has much to bear on an analysis of technologies such as facebook (and myspace in earlier years). These technologies attend to both the growing connections between humans and technology and the ever growing realization that relationships are essential for human existence. I however doubt that he could have imagined that relationships would have been established or maintained via web-based communities. These communities are showing increasing significance for adolescents, post adolescents and adults.

²⁹⁶ Gergen, 73

requirements to maintain that relationship and a larger sense of competing expectations. Multitphrenia also has the potential to expand our sense of inadequacy – manifest in the “seeping of self doubt into every day consciousness...a subtle feeling of inadequacy that smothers one’s activities with an uneasy sense of impending emptiness,” in that each value stands in conflict with others, (duty v. spontaneity, justice v. love, etc.)—making us question are we or can we ever be on the side of right.²⁹⁷ Increasingly the norm becomes that “the relatively coherent and unified sense of self inherent in a traditional culture gives way to manifold and competing potentials.”²⁹⁸

In addition to a primarily psychological discussion of identity in post-modern adolescent development, practical theologians such as Friedrich Schweitzer and Kenda Creasy Dean offer a practical theological reflection on the intersection of adolescent identity formation, post-modern society, and Christian ministry. Similar to Gergen’s “populated self” Schweitzer describes post-modern persons as “plural selves.” Dean, summarizing Gergen and other understandings of the plural self, writes “the plural self is the result of chameleon adaptations to the multiple roles demanded by post-modern culture. The plural self seeks infinite flexibility, not integration, and thereby sacrifices ‘integrity’ for a widened repertoire of potential selves, and the agility to shift between them.”²⁹⁹

Dean further argues that notions of the plural self are not incompatible with Christianity, in that “The Christian view of the self is not unitary in any way; Christian

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 74-76. Gergen is careful not to define multitphrenia as an illness and notes the increasing normalcy of such experiences.

²⁹⁸ Gergen, 80

²⁹⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 85.

identity is irreducibly relational, involving the persons of the Trinity as well as the individual and the individual's community identifications."³⁰⁰

Dean confirms my assertion that *plurality does not necessarily equal fragmentation*. Improperly integrated diversity and multiplicity of roles, identities, opinions can lead to fragmentation.³⁰¹ However, the youth in my interview sample did not demonstrate drastic signs of plural identities.³⁰² Nonetheless, examples from the interviews point to the way that youth are already experiencing incongruence between these competing visions. Some youth find it problematic, while others have developed an understanding that "this is just as it should be."³⁰³ In particular, the youth demonstrated a

³⁰⁰ Dean, 86.

³⁰¹ While I agree that there is a potentially problematic side to the experiences of plural selves/identities in youth, I do not agree with Dean's understanding that the problem lies in the inability to "distinguish between 'selves' and 'social roles.'" She argues that there is a "God-given identity as *homo religiosus*" that goes beyond social roles and serves as a means of critiquing cultural scripts and expectations of youth. (Dean, 86). I have always had difficulty with the notion of *homo religiosus* as the normative identity of all humanity or even Christians, this theological perspective has often been espoused by those who have not fully attended to the cultural and embodied realities of human experience. And in many ways it is offensive to me that this so called "God-given identity" functions to trump other "God-given identities" such as one's cultural and ethnic heritage, and even one's race and gender (while each of these are arguably social constructions they also speak to the particular ways that humans represent the diversity and complexity of the image of God).

Additionally I raise this critique and question of a spiritual a prior identity of Black Theologian Dwight Hopkins below.

Dean and I are more aligned in her assertion that the plural self requires integrity. She argues that "Youth tend to solve the problems of pluralism by relativizing truth to 'whatever,' compartmentalizing the self by carving life space into discrete cubicles. ..." However, we also diverge somewhat on her understanding of what this integration looks like. She argues that "Even plural selves require enough traction to create an affinity between roles, a "stickiness" that allows the partial self to cling to a governing center." (Dean 87) I am more optimistic that there are means of integrating plural selves that do not involve one part/self needing to become the dominant role or voice in the process. In this way I revert back to my assertion of the need to balance many dimensions of self and youth spirituality – hence the need for integrating and integrated spirituality.

³⁰² This may also have to do with the fact that in the formal interview setting they knew how to play one particular role, which often differed from what one observed in the youth in the larger context and with their peers.

³⁰³ For example, Marissa's experience of racism and favoritism with one of her teachers is not viewed as something to which she needs to respond. She asserts that this thing can't be changed and that her church/religion has nothing to say in response to this either. [Simply put, "it is what it is"].

relative level of normalcy and acceptance of the myriad social circles they were participating in.³⁰⁴

Communal and Relational Selves

Connected to Gergen's understanding of the self as communal and relational, theologian Dwight Hopkins also challenges the modernist theory of the purely individual and autonomous self, by stepping back even further to explore "what it means to be a human being, singularly and in community."³⁰⁵ Hopkins argues for the priority of collectivity or of the communal selves. Hopkins draws upon African understandings of self/selves that give "priority to collectivity." For example Hopkins quotes a Nigerian scholar, Ifeanyi A. Menkiti stating that "the African view of [the human being] denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, [the human being] is defined by reference to the environing community."³⁰⁶ Following this African perspective, Hopkins asserts that "neither self nor selves is viable...without the other."³⁰⁷ Hopkins further substantiates his view of "selves" by outlining three "interacting factors": (1) each human being is dependent on other people for life and death, sustenance and joy, and survival and liberation; (2) "the ultimate worth of the individual derives from transcendent legacies

³⁰⁴ YTI in many ways represented a break in the norm, in that it limited access to and usage of cell phones, internet, television, and other technologies of "saturation."

³⁰⁵ Dwight Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 81.

³⁰⁶ Hopkins, 82

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

already bequeathed ...prior to his/her arrival on earth”; and (3) “the self’s ontology evolves from a spiritual definition.”³⁰⁸

Each of the theories of identity formation and the ever evolving understanding of the self or selves in post-modernity outlines some of the psychological and psycho-social contexts in which fragmented spirituality among African American youth emerges. And while there is no direct causality from the theories to experiences of fragmentation, they illustrate the increasing potential for fragmentation of identity, ideology, and even action.³⁰⁹ In order to explore the context in which fragmented spirituality is emerging, I also offer examples of changes in the “sociological” and religious contexts.

Sociological Dimensions of Fragmentation and Fragmented Spirituality

Secularization and Privatization of Religion

Although the modernist prediction of secularization (or the decline of religion) throughout the world has been refuted, many sociologists of religion have noted that

³⁰⁸ Hopkins, 82-83. Although I anticipated an emphasis on the communal nature of human being, Hopkins expands upon works like Archie Smith’s *Relational Self* to better articulate how humans must be conceived of both as self (individual) and selves (communal or collective selves). The tension between self/selves is one that Hopkins holds together well in this text, both in the mere choice of “self/selves” as a linguistic tool which consistently reminds us that we cannot conceive of humans without consider both the communal and individual aspects as well as in how he attends to a communal “common good” and individual agency within communities. (Hopkins also seems to be expanding Smith conceptualization of the relational self, because Hopkins is moving more into a discussion of the nature of human beings and not focusing only on how individuals interact in community – in other words his work seems to imply an ontological connectivity that I did not experience in Smith’s work. This however could be my misinterpretation.)

Hopkins’ definition of the self/selves resonates with my understanding as I embrace his discussion of communal selves and connections to prior legacies, as well as spiritual dimensions of identity. However, as noted above, I remain reticent to endorse an a priori spiritual ontology for human beings, both as espoused by Hopkins and Dean, in her discussion of youth identity as full integration and identity as *homo religioso*.

³⁰⁹ Fragmentation is not simply the presence of a variety of ways of responding to issues in society, but fragmentation speaks to the ways that many people demonstrate a disconnection between their actions, beliefs and experiences in the world.

instead of complete secularization a privatization of religion has taken place.³¹⁰ Such sociologists of religion argue that a privatization of religion has taken place because of the way that religious beliefs became subjective in the face of “alternative interpretations of life” and the way that institutional religion became largely de-politicized “as a result of a functional differentiation of society.”³¹¹ The idea of “differentiation” refers primarily to an understanding that in modernity sharp and rigid “segmentation of the various institutional domains” took place in such a way that each domain became functionally autonomous, self-defined and governed by its internal norms.³¹²

Sociologists such as Thomas Luckmann, who authored *Invisible Religion*, argued that “traditional religious institutions were becoming increasingly irrelevant and marginal to the functioning of the modern world, and that modern religion itself was no longer to be found inside the churches.”³¹³ In other words, religion in a modern and post-modern world arguably is becoming under the primary domain of the self. Luckmann further argued that the most prevalent “invisible religion” of modernity was becoming self-expression and self-realization.³¹⁴

Noting the connections between individual and institutional role differentiation and privatization, sociologist of religion Jose Casanova argues that “since the individual’s social existence becomes a series of unrelated performances of anonymous specialized social roles, institutional segmentation reproduces itself as segmentation within the individual’s consciousness.”³¹⁵ This segmentation of the individual’s consciousness and

³¹⁰ Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11-35.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, 35.

³¹² *Ibid*, 36.

³¹³ Casanova, 36. See also Thomas Luckmann, *Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

³¹⁴ *Ibid*.

³¹⁵ Casanova, 36.

performances in turn become problematic in the face of any attempt at “meaningful integration of specifically religious and nonreligious performances and norms with their respective jurisdictional claims.”³¹⁶ As noted above in a discussion of the increasing plurality of the self, sociologists are arguing that integration or holding together the competing norms and expectations across different spheres becomes increasingly difficult. However, in addition to the psycho-social understanding of this issue, sociologists demonstrate the ways that the structures of the modern world thrive off the fact that the struggle for integration has become a “strictly personal affair.” Casanova, building on Luckmann and Durkheim, writes that:

The primary “public” institutions (state, economy) no longer need or are interested in maintaining a sacred cosmos or a public religious worldview. ...Individuals are on their own in their private efforts to patch together the fragments into a subjectively meaningful whole. Whether the individuals themselves are able to integrate these segmented performances into “a system of subjective significance” is not a relevant question for the dominant economic and political institutions—so long as it does not affect their efficient functioning adversely.³¹⁷

Theories of the privatization of religion, based on subjectivity and role differentiation, factor heavily in a discussion of fragmented spirituality. These theories point to ways that many segments of modern society expected and fostered religions, particularly institutions and communities, to remain separate from and not to affect political and systemic change. In other words, a close inspection of the theories of privatization of religion illumines, on a societal level, a “requirement” of fragmented spirituality. Under the rubric of privatization and differentiation, non-subjective or public religious understandings and convictions become suspect, particularly an expectation that

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Casanova, 37

God might influence or inspire individuals to influence spheres beyond the private or explicitly religious realms.

However, Casanova's larger work, along with many others, is designed to demonstrate that even in the face of theories of privatization of religion, there are still many examples of "public religions" or ways that religion becomes public in modern and post-modern times. Offering case studies of five "public religions" around the globe, he concludes by articulating a theory of *deprivatization* of religion. In other words, his work attempts to debunk, or at least complexify the secularization theories emphasis on the privatization of religion as well. Casanova although hesitant about the usage of the word *deprivatization*, asserts that the term is satisfactory:

...as long as the term maintains its polemical value, that is, as long as it is not widely recognized that religions in the modern world are free to enter or not enter the public sphere, to maintain more privatistic or more communal and public identities. Privatization and deprivatization are, therefore, historical options for religions in the modern world. Some religions will be induced...to remain basically private religions of individual salvation. Certain cultural traditions, religious doctrinal principles, and historical circumstances, by contrast, will induce other religions to enter, at least occasionally, the public sphere.³¹⁸

Here, Casanova reiterates that he is not pointing to a simple choice or decision of religious organizations or institutions to choose to be public or private, but in looking at the cultural, political, and traditional influences, we can see throughout history how some groups are induced to respond in particular ways.³¹⁹ Although Casanova offers

³¹⁸ Ibid, 221.

³¹⁹ On a similar note Casanova asserts that most of the moves to public or private religious involvement are temporary and only in response to larger questions.

Casanova also reminds us that in many ways the understanding of deprivatization of religion does not impose a return of religion or the church to its "state-related" model, but it pushes us to look at the ways that churches, as institutions, and sometimes as individuals begin to relate in a different type of modern/post-modern public sphere, were questions of the common good and universal human rights are discussed (and not simply the rights of one religious institution to impose its beliefs on the society as a whole).

illustrations that counter an idea that everything within the larger societal context promotes or perpetuates religious and spiritual fragmentation, his illustrations still leave questions about the possibility of integration. His work also demonstrates the need for a fuller analysis of agency in the process of communal or individual integration of competing expectations and ways of being in differentiated spheres.

American Religion: American Individualism

Once religion is disestablished, it tends to become part of the “private sphere,” and privatization is part of the story of American Religion. Yet religion, and certainly biblical religion, is concerned with the whole of life – with social, economic, and political matters as well as private and personal ones.³²⁰

Connected with discussions of privatization of religion in modern (and post-modern) time periods is the concept of individualism, particularly American individualism. American individualism helps us explore the larger sociological context in which fragmentation occurs. I also argue that American individualism goes hand in hand with the tendencies of post-modern youth to practice and express religious convictions that are primarily concerned with individual and personal themes.

Many scholars argue that American individualism, which develops alongside the Enlightenment and Great Awakening, holds equal weight in shaping the contours of

However, beyond Casanova’s descriptive project – where he illustrates the ways that particular religious communities have become public, without making normative claims as to how or whether religion should be more public—historian George Toulouse asserts that there are four distinctive ways that American Christianity and public life relate. Toulouse’s project moves beyond description and begins to advocate for the model of a public church. See George Toulouse, *God in Public*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006)

³²⁰ Robert Bellah et al. *Habits of the Heart*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008 [1985]), 220.

American religious life.³²¹ Robert Bellah et al. offer an exploration of individualism in America, pointing to the ways that it interconnects not only with public life, but also with the religious experiences and practices of Americans. As they explore the interconnections between religion and individualism, Bellah et al. describe the narrative of the now infamous “Sheila,” who named her religion after herself:

I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.³²²

Bellah et al. describe “Sheilaism” as a “perfectly natural expression of current American religious life.” However, they argue that “Sheilaism” does not emerge in a vacuum; it reflects an American history and legacy. In particular, this phenomenon builds upon the early colonial legacy of religious pluralism and religious freedom (though defined much differently than we conceive of it today). Bellah, et al. argue that even by the mid-nineteenth century, religious life in America had become drastically more privatized (compared to colonial periods), but it maintained a concern for moral order,

... it operated with a new emphasis on the individual and the voluntary association. Moral teaching came to emphasize self control rather than deference. It prepared the individual to maintain self-respect and establish ethical commitments in a dangerous and competitive world...Religion, like the family, was a place of love and acceptance in an otherwise harsh and competitive society.³²³

³²¹ Nancy Koester, *The History of Christianity in the United States*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 27-48

³²² Robert Bellah et al. *Habits of the Heart*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008 [1985]), 221. Sheilaism parallels some of the youth interviews, particularly with Marissa’s and Jackie’s narratives. Also I am always interested in what people state outright and what ideas are tempered with “I don’t know.” In looking at Sheila’s quote it is illuminating to see that she is certain that she should love herself and be gentle to herself, but she “guesses” God wants us to take care of other people.

³²³ Bellah et al, 222-3.

Essentially, by the mid-nineteenth century religious life in America was emphasizing the significance of the individual and showing signs that it was securely placed “in a compartmentalized sphere that provided loving support but could no longer challenge the dominance of utilitarian values in the society at large.”³²⁴

Bellah et al.’s contemporary data reiterates that “most Americans see religion as something individual, prior to any organizational involvement.”³²⁵ This connects with their description of religious individualism and they argue that it harkens back to seventeenth century practices that make personal experiences of salvation requirements for church membership.³²⁶ Thus they describe specific examples of religious individualism as not being contained in churches (even with the denominational arrays), but as pushing for generic values such as self-realization, without practical understandings of what this includes. Their discussion of religious individualism and the extraordinary examples of people like Sheila, in conversation with the narratives of African American youth, raises questions concerning the implications of religious individualism. In particular, how does a society full of religious individuals propel adolescents to see or reconnect with understandings of God as working beyond their individual lives? Bellah et al. offer one response as they conclude with a suggestion by Parker Palmer, who reiterates that American individualism does not need to be completely eradicated, it may simply need to be refocused:

...we have seen a conflict between withdrawal into purely private spirituality and the biblical impetus to see religion as involved with the whole life. Parker Palmer suggests that this apparent contradiction can be overcome: “Perhaps the most important ministry the church can have in the renewal of public life is a “ministry of paradox”: not to resist the

³²⁴ Ibid, 224.

³²⁵ Ibid 226.

³²⁶ Ibid, 233.

inward turn of American spirituality on behalf of public action, *but to deepen and direct and discipline that inwardness in the light of faith until God leads us back to a vision of the public and to faithful action on the public's behalf.*"³²⁷

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: De facto Youth Religion

Closely related to Bellah's discussion of the prevalence of religious individualism, and particularly *Sheilaism*, is a religious phenomenon documented specifically among American teenagers. Christian Smith, in his National Survey of Youth and Religion, offers insights into the spiritual lives among American teens across religious affiliations. After wading through the propensity of American youth to be particularly "inarticulate about religion," Smith attempted to ask the question of: "What does the bigger picture of the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers look like

³²⁷ Bellah et al., 248. See also Parker Palmer, [need to find original Palmer source...](#) Similarly, in reflecting on individualism in the Black Church, Dale Andrews writes:
The individualism endemic to the age of Enlightenment did not spare black religious life. Though black churches nurtured a communal form of care, American culture remained axiomatic to the often "unreconciled strivings" of African American "double-consciousness". Thus, *black churches emphasized personal salvation and religious piety under the impact of American individualism.* (Andrews, 56)

Andrews argues that under the influence of American individualism and revivalist Christianity, African American religious life (particularly in black churches) continued to struggle with a dueling emphasis—which he characterizes as the dual strivings towards survival and liberation. Like Lincoln and Mamiya, Andrews notes that the characterization of the Black church (and of African American spirituality) during the post-reconstruction and later during the post-Civil Rights epochs as otherworldly, only offers part of the narrative. Instead, Lincoln and Mamiya see a continued *political ambiguity* within the Black church (as an institution). (Lincoln and Mamiya, 227)

In other words, within African American Christianity [as practiced in Black churches] there is not simply an otherworldly orientation nor simply a politically driven spirituality; however there remains within African American Christianity both components. While it can be problematic to parse out how we empower African American adolescents to live within this ambiguity and to draw upon the resources of personal (survival) *and* communal (liberation) oriented dimensions of African American Christianity, it is important to affirm that not all aspects of the political ambiguity of the African American church are problematic. Many elements of African American spirituality point to and support a robust and integrated faith. For example, Lincoln and Mamiya argue that:

A deep religious faith can be the bedrock for sustaining a person in courageous political acts of liberation. Religious piety does not have to be an opiate; it can be an inspiration to civil rights militancy. Other-worldly religious transcendence can be related dialectically to the motivation, discipline, and courage needed for this-worldly political action. (Lincoln and Mamiya, 234)

when we stand back and try to put it all together?”³²⁸ Smith found that the majority of American teens thought of religion as making them feel good, helping them make good choices, solve problems or troubles, and to serve their “felt needs.”³²⁹ However, Smith’s team found fewer teens describing religion as “transforming people into...what they are supposed to be... what God wants them to be.”³³⁰ He writes:

What our interviews almost never uncovered among teens was a view that religion summons people to embrace an obedience to truth regardless of the personal consequences or rewards. Hardly any teens spoke directly about more difficult religious subjects like repentance, love of neighbor, social justice, unmerited grace, self-discipline, humility, costs of discipleship, dying to self, the sovereignty of God, personal holiness, the struggles of sanctification ... or any number of historically key ideas in America’s main religious tradition, Christianity.³³¹

Instead, Smith summarizes his findings by offering what he calls a “general thesis about teenage religion and spirituality in the U. S.” He argues that American youth religiosity tends towards “moralistic therapeutic deism” – a simplistic religion that includes a belief in God and focuses mostly on “feeling good, happy, safe, at peace,” but does not stretch to a more complex sense of faith that also calls for passionate commitments or engagement.³³² The major tenets of this religion include:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

³²⁸Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religion and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford, 2005), 162.

³²⁹Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religion and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford, 2005), 148.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, 149.

³³¹ Smith with Denton, 149.

³³² Smith with Denton, 162-164. See their work for a more complete discussion of their theory about moralistic therapeutic deism as popular religion among American adolescents.

5. Good people go to heaven when they die.³³³

Smith also generalizes about these trends, writing that the majority of American teens understood God as a cosmic butler and divine therapist, and religion as something that helped them become nice and happy people. Thus his findings indicate that the religion or spirituality of the majority of American teens does not tend toward engaged and intentional religious reflection and action.³³⁴

Smith's data also point to the ways that the religious lives and practices of youth reflect the religious lives and practices of the significant adults in their lives (especially their parents). Smith asserts that contrary to popular stereotypes about youth, as rebellious and in crisis, "the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in their religious identity and practices." The youth often describe their religious identity as "just how I was raised." Smith argues that "To the vast majority of teenagers, it was obvious that a teenager would naturally follow and believe what his or her parents believe."³³⁵

In other words, while Smith develops his understanding of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in response to the narratives of teens in the U.S., Smith argues that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is prevalent among adults and well as teens. He further argues that it operates not at the level of individual religion and not quite in the same way as an American Civil Religion; instead it operates as something beyond the level of denominations and organized churches and thus is present among youth across denominations. More precisely, Smith defines moralistic therapeutic deism as a "parasitic religion" in that it not only coexists well with other religious traditions, but it requires (or

³³³ Ibid. 162-163.

³³⁴ Ibid, 165.

³³⁵ Ibid, 120.

feeds off) other religious worldviews and traditions.³³⁶ While Smith argued that this trend was most evidenced among mainline Catholic and Protestant youth, he also found significant resonance among African American, Conservative Protestants, Jewish youth, and other “types of religious teens, [and] even non religious teens.”³³⁷

This research, while helpful in giving a general overview of the religious lives of American teens, is particularly useful in reflecting on the spiritual lives of African American youth, in that African American fragmented spirituality has significant parallels with Smith’s discussion of moralistic therapeutic deism. As noted above, in looking at the content of youth spirituality by assessing the frequency of key theological terms, Smith found that “relatively few U.S. teenagers made reference to a variety of historically central religious and theological ideas.”³³⁸ This in turn presents particular challenges and raises questions of not only how to help youth respond to dehumanizing experiences in their daily lives, but it begs the question of whether youth even have a religious system in place that can be expanded and “tapped into.”³³⁹ In many ways, Smith’s data affirms that youth find God and religion significant in their lives, while also challenging our assumptions about what youth know and how successful we have been in sharing our faith traditions with youth.

Thus in the next chapter, I continue my exploration of the context in which African American youth spirituality emerges by exploring the historical legacy of African American Christianity. I explore this legacy asking specifically what elements of this

³³⁶ Ibid,

³³⁷ Ibid, 163.

³³⁸ Ibid, 167

³³⁹ In some ways, Smith’s findings are less optimistic than Evelyn Parker’s. Parker, as noted above, saw within most of the youth interviews the essential elements of a more robust spirituality, but she did not see them as fully connected and functioning in liberative ways in the lives of youth. Smith instead points to both a lack of theological language and conceptions of God who would actively demand and encourage action on behalf of the common good.

tradition offer alternatives to fragmented spirituality and asking how we can empower youth to “tap into” and reclaim this legacy.

Chapter Six: Tapping into the Legacy

African American Spirituality and Theological Alternatives to Fragmented Spirituality

Looking at the larger societal context, in which African American adolescents develop and live out their spirituality, helps us better understand the ways that African American adolescent spirituality parallels and reflects trends of society as a whole. Fragmented spirituality corresponds with questions of fragmentation and plurality in identity formation, because of the ever increasing forms of technology and the exposure to multiple publics and spheres (beyond physical extant communities). Their fragmented spirituality also reflects trends within society to separate and delegate tasks to particular arenas – such as delegating religion to the personal and sometimes private beliefs of individuals in conversation with a plurality of other individual personal beliefs. And even in spite of examples of the ways that religion is still alive and well in the global public square, there remain trends to differentiate the roles of religion, both in personal beliefs and practices and institutions. However, an exploration of the context in which fragmented spirituality emerges among African American adolescents (and in many other communities as well) is only part of the conversation. In particular, the question of “*Do alternatives to fragmented spirituality exist, within this context and history?*” must also be addressed.

The Black Church and African American Spirituality

In this section I attempt to assess the larger, historical context and understandings of African American spirituality – as another context in which African American youth spirituality is developing. Instead of rehashing the negative trends noted in previous

chapters regarding the educational resources of contemporary African American churches, here I look at African American spirituality and Black Churches as *also* containing a corrective or alternative to fragmented spiritualities. I am not attempting to romanticize the history or practices of Black churches, and have on numerous occasions pondered whether the church (as well as the Black religious academy³⁴⁰) is capable of providing resources from which to confront the ills and dehumanization that black youth face today.³⁴¹ However, I also cannot ignore a strong and powerful legacy of doing this work within Black churches. For example, historian of religion Charles H. Long writes:

The fact that black churches have been the locus of the civil rights struggle is not incidental, for the civil rights struggle represented the black confrontation with an American myth that dehumanized the black person's being. ... The location of this struggle in the church enabled the civil rights movement to take on the resources of black cultural life in the form of organization, music, and artistic expression, and in the gathering of limited economic resources.³⁴²

Here, Long recounts the organizing power and legacy of the Black church as an agent for social change during the Civil Rights movement. Long is clear that the role of the Black church and African American religion was not incidental – instead Black churches and religion were crucial in the freedom efforts of the twentieth century. Thus, Long names and underscores the need to explore the history and resources within this community that have been instrumental in resisting dehumanization and in fighting against legal and social injustices.

³⁴⁰ I also expand this question to include the Black religious academy, recognizing the growth of Black theology and religious studies in the era since the Civil Rights movement.

³⁴¹ See the Kelly Miller Smith Institute, Inc. "What Does it Mean to Be Black and Christian?" in James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Theology: a documentary history, Volume two: 1980-1992*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 160-161. for a brief discussion of some of the challenges confronting the Black Church, and which make me question its ongoing ability to provide resources for youth (beyond the examples of the educational resources). In this working paper they list many crises in the African American community during the 1990s, which are social, economic, and political, but they also emphasize the crisis of Black faith.

³⁴² Charles H. Long, *Significations* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1999), 165.

Therefore, in this section I attempt to outline understandings of African American spirituality, historically, and in turn point to the ways that we can “tap into” or reconnect this tradition with the lived realities of African American youth. I draw upon the work of ethicists, sociologists, historians and theologians pointing to the interdisciplinary nature of the conversation about the spirituality of African Americans and the legacy of the Black Church in the U.S. These interdisciplinary conversation partners each draw upon the methodologies of their field while taking seriously the tasks of representing the spiritual lives of African Americans.³⁴³

Spirituality as Animating and Integrating Power

Peter J. Paris’ description of *The Spirituality of African Peoples* illuminates our discussion of the fragmented spirituality of African American youth by pointing to (and reminding us) that there are alternatives to fragmented or limited spirituality. Paris’ work points to alternatives both in the historical legacy of African people and in the current praxis of African American communities. Paris defines the “‘spirituality’ of a people” as “the animating and *integrative* power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences. Metaphorically, the spirituality of a people is synonymous with the soul of a people: the integrating center of power and meaning...”³⁴⁴

³⁴³It is important to note another dimension of diversity within this group of scholars. First it is important to note that while I am working with only Christian youth in my interviews and with Christian educational resources, the ways that these theorists describe African American spirituality is not always explicitly or even nominally Christian. I lift this up not as a limitation to their way of theorizing about African/African American spirituality but as a means of clarifying/reiterating that African American spirituality and even the legacy of the Black church includes both explicitly Christian (as in European and Western influenced Christian theology, doctrine, and teachings) as well as *retentions* and influences from African and African American culture, and the shared history of oppression in the United States.

³⁴⁴ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The search for common moral discourse*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 22

Paris is certain to affirm that “African spirituality is never disembodied spirituality but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life...the goal of that movement is the struggle for survival...[and] it is the union of those forces of life that have the power either to threaten and destroy life...or to preserve and enhance it...” (22).

From this definition alone, Paris' understanding of the spirituality of people of African descent stands in contrast with a fragmented spirituality. In its essence or definition, spirituality is or should be the "frame of meaning" that integrates individual and collective experiences. In other words, spirituality for Paris is that which integrates our experiences. He further argues that "Unity in diversity is another metaphor for African spirituality."³⁴⁵

In addition to defining spirituality in a way that problematizes fragmentation or any type of disconnection within the meaning of experiences, Paris' discussion of African and African American spirituality is part of his effort to define a "common moral discourse" between Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora. His search for a common moral discourse outlines themes and points to a rich legacy of communal concern and embodied spirituality – that always contains the goal of survival.³⁴⁶ His understanding of the common moral discourse centers on four "integrally related and overlapping dimensions of African cosmological and societal thought." Paris includes

- (1) The realm of the spirit (inclusive of the Supreme Deity, the sub-divinities, the ancestral spirits), which is the source and preserver of all life
- (2) The realm of tribal or ethnic community which, in equilibrium with the realm of the spirit, constitutes the paramount goal of human life
- (3) The realm of family, which in equilibrium with the realms of tribe and spirit, constitutes the principal guiding force for personal development, and
- (4) The individual person who strives to integrate the three realms in his or her soul.³⁴⁷

It remains unclear as to how he has come to define his understanding of spirituality and to what extent he sees other groups as having soul/underlying spirituality? (His definition also shares some similarities, in my view with Paul Tillich's understanding of God as the ground of all being or with Jim Fowler's appropriation of Tillich, where he defines the focus of faith as the shared center of power.)

³⁴⁵ Paris, 22.

³⁴⁶ Paris, 22.

³⁴⁷ Paris, 25.

Paris' understanding of the African cosmos, as well as the way that it undergirds the moral vision of African and African American people offers one understanding of an African spiritual legacy which connects (or strives to connect) the realm of the spirit, with the community, family, and the individual. While I am glossing over many of the nuances of this cosmology which Paris develops, I lift it up as an example of a framework from which African American adolescent spirituality emerges and one that it can also reconnect with.

A Black Sacred Cosmos: Freedom as the Superlative Value

Similarly, sociologists of religion C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, despite their assertion that “a general theory for the social analysis of black religious phenomena and a sociology of the black church has not yet appeared,” contribute to the conversation of alternatives to fragmented spirituality.³⁴⁸ They offer both a description of the religious worldview, or spirituality, of African Americans and a framework for understanding the complicated history and functions of the Black Church. First, Lincoln and Mamiya describe the religious worldview of African Americans, or the “Black Sacred Cosmos,” as the “experiential dimension” that gives rise to the Black church.³⁴⁹ Like Paris, they describe the black sacred cosmos as drawing upon both the African heritage and the conversion to Christianity during slavery and after. Lincoln and Mamiya reaffirm the work of African Americans in creating “their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 2.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

This black sacred cosmos, while dependent upon culture and history, centers on a variety of sacred objects or figures. For example, Lincoln and Mamiya describe the central role of the Old Testament God who is “avenging, conquering, liberating” within the faith of most Black churches. They argue that “The older the church or the more elderly its congregation, the more likely the demand for the exciting imagery and the personal involvement of God in history is likely to be.”³⁵¹ Lincoln and Mamiya also note the importance “Jesus as the Son of God made flesh” in African American Christianity. This centrality of Jesus emerges because of the resonance between the experiences of oppression and the “incarnational view of the suffering, humiliation, death and eventual triumph of Jesus.”³⁵² However, beyond the central role of these figures, Lincoln and Mamiya describe the “superlative value of the black sacred cosmos” as freedom, or “the absence of any restraint which might compromise one’s responsibility to God.” They also assert that this value of freedom is, and has always been, communal in nature.³⁵³

Their description of the black sacred cosmos also includes two religious practices: worship and personal conversion. In worship, Lincoln and Mamiya argue that there remains a particularly emotional or spirited form, which serves both as catharsis and as a means of intimacy with God. They write that “the Black Church was in search of transcendence, not a mere emptying of the emotions, but an enduring fellowship with

³⁵¹ Ibid, 3

³⁵² Ibid, 4

³⁵³ Ibid, 4-5. Lincoln and Mamiya lift up the communal nature of freedom in the African American cosmos in contrast to “white freedom”, which they define as supporting “the value of American individualism: to be free to pursue one’s destiny without political or bureaucratic interference or restraint... In Africa the destiny of the individual was linked to that of the tribe or community in an intensely interconnected security system” (5). They further point to the ways that African Americans in America are seldom treated as individuals.

As history unfolds it will be interesting to see how African American youth perceive and adapt to the communal or individual identities associated with being Black in America.

God...”³⁵⁴ Connected with the spirit filled worship was the experience of personal conversion. Personal conversion or “rebirth” represented a “fundamental reorientation in the approach to life”—moving one from feelings of unworthiness to an emotional experience of salvation.³⁵⁵

Exploring this black sacred cosmos provides a better understanding of the larger history in which and from which the spiritual lives of African American adolescents emerge. Reviewing this description, the narratives of the youth, and the content of the educational resources indicates continuity and divergence from this historical legacy. In particular, the educational resources and youth narratives demonstrate a level of continuity in the central role of God and Jesus. However the emphasis on God as “avenging, conquering, liberating” or even actively involved in history is not primary. Similarly, the understanding of the superlative value of black religion as “freedom” – specifically a communal freedom to be responsible to God is not evidenced in the data. An additional point of divergence between this sacred cosmos and the narratives of the youth interviewed is evidenced by simply noting the frequency with which youth even mention Jesus. Jesus or Christ was only mentioned, not discussed in great detail, in two of the interviews. Additionally, in these two interviews Jesus is not explicitly described as a central figure.

Dialectical and Dialogical Models of the Black Church

Beyond their discussion of the “Black Sacred Cosmos,” Lincoln and Mamiya both expand and counter decades of theorizing about the Black church by introducing a

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 6

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 6. While the emphasis on conversion is not surprising given the context in which most slaves were converted – the Great Awakening, the continuing emphasis on personal conversion and its central role in the Black Church cannot be overlooked.

dialectical typology that seeks to hold in tension the major features or characterizations of the African American church.³⁵⁶ They write that “Black churches are institutions that are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions. The dialectic holds polar opposites in tension, constantly shifting between polarities in historical time.” In their examination of the social conditions of black churches, they enumerate six main pairs of polar opposites: “The dialectic between priestly and private functions...other-worldly versus this-worldly...universalism and particularism...the communal and the privativistic...the charismatic versus the bureaucratic...resistance versus accommodation...”³⁵⁷ This dialectical model (and pairs of opposites) addresses the functions of the black church, the orientation that believers have toward the world, the orientation the institution has toward the larger American society and towards the African American community, as well as the organizational structure of Black churches. In articulating the dialectical model, Lincoln and Mamiya saw this typology as a needed corrective to the historical trends in theorizing about the black church as either “compensatory” or “other-worldly,” which Lincoln and Mamiya noted soon becomes outdated:

These six pairs of dialectical polarities give a more comprehensive view of the complexity of black churches as social institutions, including their roles and functions in black communities. The strength of the dialectical model of the Black Church is that it leads to a more dynamic view of black churches along a continuum of dialectical tension, struggle and change. The problem of single, nondialectical typological views of black churches is that they tend to categorize and stereotype black churches into rigid pigeonhole categories like “other-worldly”; they miss the historical dynamism of institutions moving back and forth in response to certain issues or social conditions. ...Whatever polarities are used, the most

³⁵⁶ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 2, 10. Here they are building on an earlier synopsis of the “interpretive schemes or social scientific models found in the work of past researches of the Black church” presented by Hart Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen in *Black Church in the Sixties*.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 12-15.

important aspect of the model is to stress the dialectical tension and constant interactions.³⁵⁸

This model of the Black church holds together the historical legacy of African American religion and institutions, which includes both the radical traditions of Black religion and its active engagement with cultural movements. The radical traditions include those espoused by historian Gayraud Wilmore, in his seminal text *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; the active engagement with cultural movements includes events such as the Civil Rights and Black Power movement that characterizes much of the early Black Liberation Theology.³⁵⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya's model also holds these traditions in tension with the legacy of Black churches as spiritual oasis in the midst of a harsh and oppressive society. Hence, their model outlines the complex and interactive trends within the Black church and African American Christianity.

However in response to Lincoln and Mamiya's dialectical model of the black church and the resultant views of African American Christians, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham suggests that this dialectical model does not go far enough, and she offers a *dialogical* model. Higginbotham, in the introduction to *Righteous Discontent*, characterizes the dialogical model of the Black church as "a multiplicity of protean and concurrent meanings and intentions more so than in a series of discrete polarities."³⁶⁰ In other words, Higginbotham stresses the fact that the tensions and features of the Black church are not a set of separate continuums that it negotiates according to a particular

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 15.

³⁵⁹ See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism. Third Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003 [1973]), James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds. *Black Theology: A documentary history, Volumes 1 and 2.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003 [1993]), and James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1970) for examples of the histories and theology espousing and reflecting radical traditions of African American Christianity.

³⁶⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.

socio-historical movement. Instead, a better model for the Black church recognizes and incorporates the interconnectivity of each of the polarities described by Lincoln and Mamiya and goes beyond the polarities to see that at any moment the features and meanings are constantly impinging upon one another. Higginbotham would stress that it is impossible to treat each of the polarities separately. For example, even as we look at the priestly versus prophetic functions of the black church, we see that this trait is intricately connected with whether the church chooses a more resistant or accommodating stance towards the larger society, and whether the work of the church is focused on individual needs or communal concerns. While Lincoln and Mamiya's model is theoretically neater and makes it easier to describe attributes of black churches and to do comparative work among particular black churches; it does not capture the "messiness" and myriad overlapping constellations of meanings that is the Black church and African American Christianity.

Higginbotham argues for a dialogical model of the black church because she understands that:

Multiple discourses—sometimes conflicting, sometimes unifying—are articulated between black men and women, and within each of these two groups as well. The black church constitutes a complex body of shifting cultural, ideological, and political significations. It represents a "heteroglot" conception in the Bakhtinian sense of a multiplicity of meanings and intentions that interact and condition each other. Such multiplicity transcends polarity—thus tending to blur the spiritual and secular, the eschatological and political, and the private and public.³⁶¹

Essentially, beyond seeing that each of Lincoln and Mamiya's discrete pairs of polarities interacts with the other pairs of polarities, Higginbotham states that the polarities themselves do not hold; for instead of seeing things along a continuum, she argues that

³⁶¹ Ibid, 16.

the Black church blurs these conceptions and characterizations. She draws on the Russian linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" in his theory of language, where he writes "Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others."³⁶² In making this parallel Higginbotham describes the Black church as dialogical and heteroglot—indicating that in describing the greater whole and legacy of the Black church, there will always be a constant interaction between meanings and it is artificial not to stress how each of these meanings in turn conditions the others. Higginbotham further points to the ways that new meaning and complex forms are created out of these "tensions" within the Black church. New meaning and understandings are not created by holding discrete things in tension (because there is often no tension); instead, in moments when two seemingly opposite ways of being are brought together something new emerges.³⁶³

While Higginbotham and Lincoln and Mamiya are offering sociological and historical frameworks for theorizing about the African American church, I also see their work as outlining the complex, dialogical nature of African American Christian spirituality as well. In other words, Higginbotham (as well as Lincoln and Mamiya as noted above) is pointing to an understanding of African American spirituality and the Black Church as including the "radical" trends as well as the healing rituals and practices

³⁶² Ibid, 16, 236.

³⁶³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16. Higginbotham writes, "The black church constitutes a complex body of shifting cultural, ideological, and political significations. It represents a "heteroglot" conception in the Bakhtinian sense of a multiplicity of meanings and intentions that interact and condition each other. Such multiplicity transcends polarity—thus tending to blur the spiritual and secular, the eschatological and political, and the private and public."

of Pentecostal preachers, such as Lucy Smith.³⁶⁴ In other words, Higginbotham attempts to push us towards a model of thinking about the religious lives of African Americans that holds together in constant and constructive dialogue many beliefs, actions, and ways of being in the world. In this way, Higginbotham's understanding of the Black Church and African American spirituality as "heteroglot" – where the integration of seemingly disparate parts results in the emergence of a spirituality that is both different from and more than the "sum of its parts", offers an alternative to fragmentation among African American youth. Her dialogical model emphasizes the complex legacy of African American Christianity and challenges me to parse out how to build upon and reconnect youth with this complex, dialogical legacy.³⁶⁵

Normative Theological Conceptions: Expanding the Nascent Theologies of Youth

Closely related to the historical legacy of the Black Church and African American spirituality are the explicit theological claims and norms that also offer alternatives to fragmented spirituality. In chapter three, as I attempted to describe the spiritual lives and perspectives of the African American youth interviewed, I outlined many of their understandings about God, the church and the community. In many ways these responses are evidence of their nascent, if not fully articulated or realized, theology. However, beyond describing and interpreting youth understandings of God and conceptions of God in the educational resources of contemporary African American churches, a practical

³⁶⁴ See Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 147-180 for a description of Lucy Smith and her ministry in the Chicago area

³⁶⁵ Higginbotham's model also empowers us to recognize and discuss the trends in African American women's Christianity which included everything from acts of personal piety and "a politics of respectability" as a strategy for racial progress, to fund raising, cross race dialogue, and formal resistance in woman's suffrage movements and anti-lynching campaigns.

theological analysis also engages in making normative claims. As noted above, I attempt to present the youth voices in as unmediated a fashion as possible, but the entirety of this project is guided by my interpretation and analysis. In this section I push this interpretation further, and begin to clarify my claims about what “should or might be” as opposed to what is currently operative in the spiritual lives of African American adolescents.³⁶⁶

Above I note the ways that African American Christianity historically includes complexity and holds together many trajectories; thus, in this section I build on the dialogical model of spirituality as vital for African American youth to embrace and name some of the concrete characteristics, values and normative beliefs which are essential to responding to fragmented spirituality. In particular, Womanist Theology is an indispensable conversation partner and influence on my theological commitments; and it shapes the norms which I outline as essential for African American Adolescents to reconnect with. I explore this part of the African American Christian legacy in greater detail here.³⁶⁷

Womanist Spirituality and Theology

Womanist spirituality and religious thought is developed within the religious and social world of African American women throughout history. It includes and connects with the experiences of biblical women, as described in Delores Williams’ exposition of

³⁶⁶ I need to acknowledge that the normative move in the practical theological task is often the hardest for me. For even though I am making normative claims and assertions throughout this dissertation, it is more difficult to argue and substantiate why/how a particular set of beliefs *should* be embraced above others.

³⁶⁷ This is not to say that I have not been influenced greatly by Black Liberation Theology or even European/European American theologies of John Wesley, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and more contemporary process theologies, etc. However, I both identify theoretically and theologically more fully with Womanism and see these themes throughout my own faith journey and as significant for the African American youth interviewed in this dissertation.

the narrative of Hagar, as well as the lives of African and African American women, such as those described in Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*.³⁶⁸ Womanist theology takes the lives and experiences of African American (and by extension the range of experiences that affect African American communities) as primary in the process of critical and constructive theological reflection. Linda E. Thomas writes that

Womanist theology engages the macro-structural and the micro-structural issues that affect black women's lives and, since it is a theology of complete inclusivity, the lives of all black people. The freedom of black women entails the liberation of all peoples, since womanist theology concerns notions of gender, race, class, heterosexism, and ecology. Furthermore, it takes seriously the historical and current contributions of our African forebears and women in the African diaspora today. It advances a bold leadership style that creates fresh discursive and practical paradigms and "talks back" (hooks 1988) to structures, white feminists, and black male liberation theologians. Moreover, womanist theology asserts what black women's unique experiences mean in relation to God and creation and survival in the world. Thus the tasks of womanist theology are to claim history, to declare authority for ourselves, our men, and our children, to learn from the experience of our forebears, to admit shortcomings and errors, and to improve our quality of life.³⁶⁹

Thomas' succinct articulation of the discipline and work of Womanist theology builds upon the writings of Womanist scholars and theologians. For example, Thomas' definition connects with the "autobiographical" or self disclosure that Delores Williams includes in her preface to *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Although, Williams' intent was simply to do responsible theological reflection and name her social location, her description also offers a paradigm for understanding Womanist thought and spirituality. Williams writes:

³⁶⁸ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003 [1993]).

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁶⁹ Linda Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm" in *Cross Currents*. <http://www.aril.org/thomas.htm> (accessed 2/19/2010)

...I find myself testifying. Faith, hard won, has taught me how to value the gains, losses, stand-offs and victories in my life. Many times the painful moments would not have been healed were it not for the road I traveled to faith—learning to trust the righteousness of God in spite of trouble and injustice; learning to trust women of many colors regardless of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia in our society; learning to believe in the sanctuary-power of family defined in many ways in addition to nuclear; discovering love in a variety of forms that heal, but also believing serious political action is absolutely necessary for justice to prevail in the world... Faith has taught me to see the miraculous in everyday life: the miracle of ordinary black women resisting and rising above ...³⁷⁰

Williams points to essential elements of *trusting God, trusting other women, the sanctuary-power of family, discovering love, and serious political action* as part of her journey of faith and as part of her Womanist thought and theological process.

However, in order to understand Womanist epistemology and spirituality, it is also essential to look at the powerful self-defining project of Alice Walker, whose literary definition inspired and captured the religious understandings of generations of African American women and communities. Walker's multipart definition of Womanist begins with:

From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e. [that is], frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," [that is] like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.³⁷¹

Walker's definition affirms that womanist entails being (1) active, (2) outrageous, (3) a seeker of knowledge (never satisfied with the information passed onto one or deemed acceptable for one to have), and (4) serious. Thus, we can interpret that a womanist

³⁷⁰ Delores Williams, ix-x.

³⁷¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

spirituality is not passive spirituality, but is actively seeking knowledge and depth. Walker's definition also illumines the ways that womanist spirituality includes transgression; in that, a womanist spirit does not easily "stay in one's place," neither is it easily contained or defined. Similarly, ethicist Emilie Townes' work on Womanist spirituality reiterates that *resistance*, *transgression*, and *social witness* of oppressive structures are essential parts of the womanish spirit.³⁷²

Looking together at Walker's full definition of womanist and the appropriation of this definition by Womanist religious scholars, we see an understanding of womanist thought as taking seriously the lives of African American women and offering a model for the integral role of faith, love, community, creative expression, and acts of resistance (including political action).³⁷³ Womanist spirituality is both spiritual and resistant, and thus offers an alternative to fragmented spirituality by exemplifying a model of holding together and balancing love of spirit, self, others, and the community; and a model of being active, transgressive, outrageous and responsible.³⁷⁴

Building on these definitions and reflections on womanist spirituality, I begin to articulate a few theological claims which are essential in helping African American youth

³⁷² Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9

In addition to Townes' discussion of resistance as an essential element of Womanist spirituality, theologian Kelly Brown Douglas also describes and defines a "spirituality of resistance" in her work *The Black Christ*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), 130.

³⁷³ Here, we also see that a womanist spirit and spirituality entails:

1. Embodying sexual and nonsexual love of women and men, and one's self regardless,
2. Being communally oriented –with an active commitment to the survival and wholeness of all;
3. As well as embracing/loving the creative and artistic impulses (such as dance, music, food and roundness), regardless.

³⁷⁴ Therefore a womanish spirit serves as an alternative to fragmented spirituality in that it pushes youth to embrace or reclaim a spirit of resistance and social witness – to embrace an understanding that wherever there is wrong in the world, wherever they see and name concerns, there is also a need for them to resist it and to work with God to improve upon it; and to couple that spirit of resistance with a commitment to their communities' wholeness and survival.

address the trends of fragmented spirituality, and to live in such a way that they are able to resist the daily affronts to their humanity.

I must reiterate that these normative theological claims are only a brief, introductory response to the themes raised in the youth interviews and educational resource data. I do not attempt a systematic theological treatment of or response to fragmented spirituality, nor do I attempt to map out an exhaustive response.³⁷⁵ Instead I offer four concepts which respond to the trends in the youth interview data towards a fragmented spirituality, as evidenced in

- An emphasis on God to bless youth individually and only a nascent understanding of how God is “calling” youth to respond;
- A limited treatment of any concept of change, conversion, or transformation; and
- An emphasis on the personal and limited engagement with the communal and political.³⁷⁶

Cooperation with God

*Expanding Understandings of God – Beyond Beneficent Friend or Sovereign Lord*³⁷⁷

In reflecting on the theological understandings of young people and the educational resources presented in African American churches, the centrality of a personal and beneficent God persists. As noted in chapter 3, all of the youth surveyed and interviewed described a time when they “experienced the presence” of God in their lives. The majority of the youth named experiences of God’s presence in moments when God

³⁷⁵ This is both a statement of my sense of inadequacy for that task, but also a belief that it is impossible to ever exhaust the ways of thinking and responding with God, or to know the full range of practices that one might utilize in this work. In this way, I genuinely remain open to the spirit and anticipate the emergence of new ways of being and living in response to oppressive structures.

³⁷⁶ This was particularly evidenced in the educational resources. Moreover my critique that the educational resources did not include an understanding of change, conversion, or transformation also includes some astonishment at the relatively low salience of salvation (however one defines it) in the youth interviews and educational resources.

³⁷⁷ Here I wrestle with questions such as: *Is God more than a Beneficent Friend? Can we balance images of a mighty God and a God that we participate with? Can we understand both the role of God in blessing humans and the role of God in requiring much from humanity?*

“blessed them,” or did something for them. Youth were very articulate about this understanding of God, and some youth explicitly named God as spiritually meaningful and very powerful in propelling them towards personal success.³⁷⁸ Similarly, the educational resources offered a broad and complex array of metaphors and images of God; introducing images of a powerful, creative and sovereign God, in addition to the beneficent and ever-present God.

However, there were fewer consensuses in the youth’s discussions of God in connection with the places where they articulated hopelessness or even frustration. As noted above, one young woman did not see God as connecting with her experiences of racism in her school. Equally, there was a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty related to their understandings of God’s work in their communities, the world and politics. This ambiguity was also evidenced in the educational resources, in that they too contained limited discussions of the ways that God can or is working beyond personal and spiritual arenas.

In spite of the limitations and ambiguities in their discussions of God, I am not arguing that youth should get rid of their understanding of God’s goodness and presence in their lives—God needs to remain spiritually powerful and concerned about their lives. In many ways this is the most operative element in each of the interviews; and this understanding of God is also the most prevalent in the religious lives of youth within the larger body of research on youth religion.³⁷⁹ In order to respond to a fragmented spirituality, where God is present and powerful only in certain areas and not mentioned in

³⁷⁸ While I note a much more complex picture of God presented in the educational materials, the majority of those images and the ones developed in the sermons also resonate with the understanding of God who is with us, encouraging and blessing us. (See Chapter 4 for a fuller exploration of the understandings of God in the sermons and curriculum).

³⁷⁹ See Christian Smith, 162-163.

others, pushes us to explore strategies for expanding upon this understanding of a blessing, loving, and sometimes powerful God.

On one hand, the most obvious corrective includes pushing youth to embrace a vision of God that is wonderfully good and all power in all areas of the lives of young people; and to affirm the miracle working, transformative power of a God who can do all things well. And for many African American Christian youth, a *naïve* belief in a wonderfully good and all powerful God is already operative. However, a blind embrace of the goodness and power of God conflicts with their lived realities, even if only on a subconscious level. Because of the conflicting images of an all wonderful and powerful God with their ongoing dehumanization, God is not seen in or expected to transform all areas of their lives, particularly areas of societal injustice. Consequently, I am not calling for youth to believe that God will do all things miraculously and change society instantaneously. Instead I affirm that a more complex understanding of God, beyond being good and powerful, must become operative in the lives of African American adolescents.

In many ways, an expansion of their understandings of what God does is required—to include that God may not always operate in miraculous or instantaneous ways. I am not attempting to down play or lessen the *power* of God. Instead, I argue that if the only understanding youth have of God is one in which God is all powerful, all good, and only operates in the miraculous and instantaneous, then youth will constantly have to apologize or regroup when their lived realities and dehumanizing experiences call this image of God into question. Instead, a closer read of biblical texts, both in the narrative of Hagar, which is essential to Delores William's womanist god-talk, and in the

narrative of Jesus Christ, reveals images of God who does not always (or even most often) step in and miraculously change societal structures of oppression. The Biblical narratives, however, presents tremendous models and examples of humans that are strengthened to survive, persist and endure in the face of injustice.

For example, Williams argues that “God’s response to Hagar’s story in the Hebrew testament is not liberation. Rather, God participated in Hagar and her child’s survival... Liberation in the Hagar stories is not given by God; it finds its source in human initiative.”³⁸⁰ In other words, while arguing that God’s response is not always one of liberation – she is not calling liberation and resistance in the face of injustice into question. She is however calling us to a reorientation in our understanding of how liberation and resistance come about. Williams presses us to expand our understandings of God and human work in struggles of liberation. Williams, as well as other womanist scholars, are pushing us beyond passively waiting on the miraculous intervention or gift of God. Instead she emphasizes the role of human agency and initiative in the struggles towards liberation. Essentially, she posits a model of active cooperation with God and pushes us to reconnect with “the [African American] community’s belief in God’s presence in the struggle,” even if or when the struggle persists and requires great endurance.³⁸¹ Similarly, post-modern womanist theologian, Monica Coleman, aptly writes that

Not all evil can be overcome in this world, and yet ... [she] maintains hope in the struggle to creatively and constructively respond to it... All-encompassing health, wholeness, unity, and salvation are never fully attained in this world... God may not always lead us in ways that feel

³⁸⁰ Williams, 5. Williams’s articulation of the *survival/quality of life* theme in biblical narratives was and remains controversial in many African American communities and even in conversation with the more radical and militant strands of Black Liberation Theology.

³⁸¹ Williams, 6.

liberating. Sometimes God...will feel like a judge. But creative transformation is leading us to a way that will improve quality of life.³⁸²

In other words, Coleman's post-modern and process womanist theology outlines key elements that push beyond a mere expectancy of a good or sovereign God to "fix everything" to a place of affirming that "salvation is an activity."³⁸³ For Coleman, salvation is an ongoing activity and we are called not to passively wait on God, but to live in "cooperation with God for the social transformation of the world."³⁸⁴ Therefore, expanding upon the youth understanding of God also requires conceiving of a God that calls youth to participate, cooperate, and act with God. Here, I am intentional in describing this as an "expansion" and not an introduction of the idea of youth cooperation with God; in that, many youth already name in their interviews an understanding that God calls them to work for change or to respond to things that concern them in their community. Thus, I am simply asserting that we need to make this understanding of God, the one that calls and expects our active participation, normative and not simply focus on the God that blesses us or rules over us.

Conversion and Transformation

In addition to expanding the prevalent understandings of God to include a stronger emphasis of the role of cooperation and participation with God in social transformation, I also argue that in some ways we need to take a step back. For example,

³⁸² Coleman, 85-93. Here I note tremendous differences in the rhetoric and pragmatism between post-modern womanist thought and earlier articulations of Black liberation theologies. For example, Coleman's work offers a dose of "common sense realism" in pushing us to acknowledge the reality that oppressive structures will persist and that all of our work towards justice will not be realized in this world. However, she is not (or should not) be lumped into the extreme caricatures of African American Christians as other-worldly. Instead, she holds together an eschatological hope of complete transformation with an urgency to work to resist injustice now.

³⁸³ Coleman, 86

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

expanding our understanding of God to see ourselves as called to participate in transforming the world also requires a stronger theological understanding of both conversion and transformation. I am not asserting that conversion and transformation are the same, historically or in contemporary parlance; instead, I want youth to see an interconnection between what is often characterized as personal and spiritual conversion experiences and social communal transformation.³⁸⁵

In general, discussions of change, spiritual or communal, were decidedly absent or at best limited in their representation in the youth interviews and educational resources. For example, the youth interviewed did not offer any evidence that an understanding of religious conversion was significant in their religious experiences. Even in interviews with youth from more conservative traditions, only one youth named salvation, “a relationship with God, and [having] let Christ in your life as your personal savior,” and deliverance from particular bad habits or struggles, as part of the essential teachings of her church.³⁸⁶ While recognizing general trends in youth to be “inarticulate” about their religious lives, I argue that the youth interviewed are not merely lacking the words to describe these experiences; but, these concepts are not a vital part of their religious experiences. Essentially the ideas of conversion and transformation are missing in youth theological vocabulary and worldviews.

However, I argue that conversion and transformation can provide a powerful corrective to trends within fragmented spirituality, particularly trends to disconnect the minimal ways that they understand God calling them from the concerns that many youth

³⁸⁵ I emphasize an understanding of transformation as opposed to conversion, salvation or even sanctification (which are historically Christian traditions). I see and understand transformation as intricately connected with the doctrines of salvation and what occurs in the act of salvation.

³⁸⁶ Kira Interview Transcript, 10. She also stated that deliverance was also important in her church’s teachings.

name and experience in the world around them. For example, the low salience of the idea of change or transformation in youth worldviews can account for (or reflect) the many ways that youth describe situations, such as violence or racism in their communities, as never changing. Instead by reclaiming or tapping into the spiritual practice of conversion and efforts to work for social and communal transformation, youth can begin to understand the power of God working in them in ways that catalyze their work for change and renew their spirits in the struggles.

Conversion as Reorientation and Re-Visioning

For example, in discussing dimensions of the “black experience,” Delores Williams describes the strong emphasis placed on the “encounter between God and humans.” Cecil Cone also describes this encounter and the resultant conversion experience, writing:

...Recognition of one’s sinfulness was merely the first step in the dynamics of the black religious experience. It was followed by what has commonly been known ...as saving conversion. The character of conversion was marked by the suddenness with which the slave’s heart was changed. It was an abrupt change in his orientation toward reality; it affected every aspect of the slave’s attitude and beliefs...The new level of reality...caused the slave to experience a sense of freedom in the midst of human bondage.³⁸⁷

Cone’s description of the historical experience of conversion points to the way that conversion served as a reorientation in worldview and consciousness. And while I am not asserting a return to Great Awakening theologies of sin and damnation which were often precursors for a personal conversion experience, I affirm that an understanding of one’s self in relationship with God and even an experience of God should have the power to

³⁸⁷ Cecil Cone, quoted in Delores Williams, 155. See also Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), 23.

alter one's beliefs and attitudes, and to inform one's consciousness. Similarly, Delores Williams writes that:

...the encounter between God and women in the wilderness experience does more than strengthen women's faith and empower them to persevere in spite of trouble... [it] also provides these women with new vision to see survival resources where they saw none before... transformation of consciousness and epistemological process come together in the new great faith-consciousness this meeting [between God and women] bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's ways of being and acting in the wide, wide world. Their stories tell of their absolute dependence on God generated by a faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity.³⁸⁸

Essentially, Williams is asserting that an encounter between God and women and the resultant conversion experience empowers women, beyond perseverance; conversion encounters and the resultant "faith-consciousness" offers women new ways of seeing and acting in the world. Williams credits this type of encounter with God for many of the creative and visionary responses of women that shaped black political history in the U.S.³⁸⁹

Conversion as Creative Transformation

However, beyond the historical practices of conversion, post-modern womanist thought also underscores the significant role of transformation and the understanding of salvation – often defined by black women as survival and “making a way out of no way.” In particular, Monica Coleman's articulation of *creative transformation* connects with my understanding of the role of conversion-transformation in responding to the fragmented spirituality of African American youth. Drawing upon the resources of process and Womanist theologies, Coleman describes the interconnected concepts of “creative

³⁸⁸ Williams, 159.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

transformation” and “making a way out of no way” as “a type of change that transforms humanity and the wider world.” More specifically Coleman argues that

“Making a way out of no way” involves God’s presentation of unforeseen possibilities; human agency; the goal of justice, survival, and quality of life; and a challenge to the existing order...This constructive womanist concept of salvation comes from the new vision that God provides to black women, who then have significant agency in moving the future toward a just and participatory society...[Creative transformation] to use Cobb’s language, “struggle[s] against death dealing powers that threaten us.”³⁹⁰

Coleman’s articulation of creative transformation, thus pushes us to not only value the encounter between God and humanity, but reminds us (as did Williams) of the ways that God presents new possibilities in these encounters and calls on human agency in acting upon the new visions presented by God. Creative transformation, or “making a way out of no way” can offer youth a framework for responding to the myriad dehumanizing experiences, even when they do not see possibilities of change or of things getting better.

Conversion to the Neighbor: Spirituality of Liberation

While firmly rooted in the traditions and history of African American spirituality, I also find great resonance with the work of Latin American liberation theologians and I develop some of my theological understandings in light of this conversation as well. In particular, Gustavo Gutierrez’s discussion of conversion and a spirituality of liberation is invaluable in discussing alternatives to fragmented spirituality and in calling African American youth anew to the tasks of responding to dehumanizing experiences in their lives and communities. For example, in his seminal text *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez writes that

³⁹⁰ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A womanist theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 93.

theological categories are not enough. We need *a vital attitude, all-embracing and synthesizing, informing the totality as well as every detail of our lives*; we need a “spirituality.” Spirituality in the strict profound sense of the word is the dominion of the Spirit. ...[and the Spirit] will lead us along the path of liberation because “where the Spring of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17).

A spirituality is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of living the Gospel; it is a definite way of living “before the Lord,” in solidarity with all men, “with the Lord,” and before men.³⁹¹[emphasis added]

Gutierrez’s understanding of spirituality echoes other definitions, such as Peter Paris’ that point to the way that spirituality undergirds and runs throughout the entirety of human life and connects with or “informs...every detail of our lives”.³⁹² However, Gutierrez also writes that

Where oppression and the liberation of [humanity] seem to make God irrelevant³⁹³—a God filtered by our longtime indifference to these problems—there must blossom faith and hope in him who comes to root out injustice and to offer, in an unforeseen way, total liberation.³⁹⁴

A spirituality of liberation will center on a *conversion* to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race, the dominated country...conversion to the Lord implied conversion to the neighbor...Conversion means radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ...To be converted means to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely...with an analysis of the situation and a strategy for action.³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 205.

³⁹² Ibid

³⁹³ This claim of the irrelevance of God and the church is echoed in the sentiments of African American youth. See also Albert G. Miller. “What Jesus Christ and African American Teenagers are telling the African American Church.” *The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture 1997*, <http://www.ptsem.edu/iyml/lectures/1997/Miller-What.pdf>, (accessed on 5/20/07), 37.

³⁹⁴ Here I point to a difference in Gutierrez and my understanding of the work of God in Christ. While I affirm the need for hope in the one who comes to root out injustice, later I will argue that we need to be careful to not focus solely on an understanding of God’s work to root out injustice, but must also fully affirm our cooperation with God in working to end injustice.

Also Gutierrez ascribes to God the ability to offer *total liberation* this term needs to be fully explicated and carefully utilized. In that I also see the potential for creating a false understanding of what and how God liberates in emphasizing (or simply stating): *total liberation*.

³⁹⁵ Gutierrez, 204-205. Gutierrez also further points to the ways that conversion requires a change and conflict. He writes that “Our conversion process is affected by the socio-economic, political, cultural, and human environment in which it occurs. Without a change in these structures, there is no authentic conversion.” (205)

Gutierrez's understanding of conversion to the neighbor, in conjunction with the definitions of Williams and Coleman, illustrates an explicit connection between a conversion experience and concern with and for the oppressed in the world. Therefore, in order to respond to fragmented spirituality among contemporary youth, who in many ways do not include themselves among the oppressed and struggling, there is a need to underscore the ways that we are called to connect conversion to Christ with a commitment to strategically respond to the oppression of others.

Hope

Beyond Wishful Thinking—to Desire and Expectation

*This is hope, to desire and to expect. To desire but not expect is not hope, for though you desire the moon, you hardly hope for it. To expect but not to desire is not hope, for who that expects his or her loved one to die could be said to hope for it? But to desire, and to expect the desire's fulfillment, that is hope. And we are saved by hope.*³⁹⁶

Looking across the youth interviews and survey responses, the tone and content of the youth interviews are not overtly lacking in hope.³⁹⁷ However, in reviewing the educational resources, I was surprised to find that none of the sermons or Sunday school lessons emphasized hope as a theological or practical theme. This is particularly fascinating in light of some of Evelyn Parker earliest responses to the fragmented spirituality she observed among African American youth in Chicago.

³⁹⁶ Mary M. Townes, "Looking to Your Tomorrows Today" in Emilie Townes, editor. *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 4. [emphasis original]

³⁹⁷ The youth are upbeat in their conversations and tend to have a positive outlook on their lives and aspirations. However, as noted above when youth describe particular incidents or concerns in their communities they demonstrate less upbeat or hopeful attitudes. Thus I do not classify the youth as hopeless or experiencing tremendous hopelessness in general.

Emancipatory Hope

Parker develops the principle of “emancipatory hope” which she defines as “expectation that dominant powers of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism will be toppled and that African American adolescents have agency in God’s vision for dismantling these powers of domination.”³⁹⁸ She further defines this type of hope as part of “that intricately woven life of divine and human self-understanding that expects God’s transformative power and acts in God’s transformative power against economic, political, and social domination.”³⁹⁹ In line with the concepts outlined above (such as cooperation with God and conversion as God introducing new visions and resources with which humans are called to act to respond to injustice), this understanding of hope both expects God’s transformative power and is manifest in our work or actions. In this way, Parker argues that fragmented spirituality and “emancipatory hope” are incompatible. Parker is careful to note that hope is not mere wishful thinking, but it is a hope – that is actively expecting and anticipating God’s movement in the world.

Expanding upon the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Parker also calls for “oppositional imagination” in helping youth to “[envision] alternative ways of thinking” and begin to live out this type of emancipatory hope.⁴⁰⁰ Coupled with the expectation and hope of God’s transformative power in the world, an oppositional imagination invites youth into the practice of imagining the world “as it could be” – seeing an alternative to racism, sexism, violence, and other dehumanizing experiences.

³⁹⁸ Parker, viii.

³⁹⁹ Parker, 37.

⁴⁰⁰ Parker, 48

Eschatological Hope

In a similar way, youth ministry educator, Fernando Arzola, Jr. outlines his vision of *eschatological hope* within “prophetic youth ministry.” In outlining the distinctions between four types of ministry with urban youth, Arzola argues that

A prophetic youth ministry promotes eschatological hope...[it] succeeds when the prophetic message has been spoken and enacted, not just when it sees results in terms of actual liberation or change of social conditions. Yet this prophetic hope must be held without giving in to defeatism or inactivity.⁴⁰¹

Like Coleman above, Arzola emphasizes that in spite of the fact that not all systemic ills or oppressive structures will be overturned immediately (or in our lifetime), there remains a need for hope that transcends temporal successes or change. Here Arzola points to another dialogical tension that must be promoted in order to respond to fragmented spirituality in African American youth. Namely, we must live within the tension of expecting and proclaiming God’s prophetic word, “pointing to the kingdom of God which will only be fully realized in the future”; while actively working towards change.⁴⁰²

In his work, Arzola juxtaposes his vision of prophetic youth ministry with radical or activist youth ministry, which simply strives to work for change and tends to only understand success in terms of the actualization or realization of change in the current or immediate community. However, Arzola reminds us that much of the prophetic ministry of the Hebrew Bible prophets and of Jesus is steeped not only in the actualized change, but in their persistence in speaking truth to power *and* pointing persons to a hope-filled vision of the world that goes beyond their current realities. Arzola’s description of

⁴⁰¹ Fernando Arzola, Jr. *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 33

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

eschatological hope pushes youth to connect with the hope of their ancestors; for example, Dale Andrews argues that “[slaves and newly free persons] sustained hope and nurtured the practical quest for liberation...otherworldly promises translates into this-worldly hope and ways of being.”⁴⁰³

Both Parker’s and Arzola’s understandings of hope are helpful in responding to fragmented spirituality in youth, because it pushes youth to move beyond the ambiguity with which they describe racism or violence ending and even the ambiguity with which they describe God’s activity in the world. Embracing an emancipatory and eschatological hope empowers youth to actively expect God’s transformation and begin to see themselves as part of that transformative thrust.

Communal Care and Social Witness: Reorientation towards a Public Theology

In the previous sections of this chapter, we see the emphasis on the communal orientation of African and African American spirituality; Paris, Lincoln and Mamiya, as well as Womanist thinkers point to community or communalism as undergirding the historical experiences of African Americans and as essential for their spirituality. Amazingly however, a communal orientation or emphasis is drastically underrepresented in the educational resources examined in this dissertation. While all of the youth participants are active in their communities (engaged in some type of volunteer service), their motivations were not explicitly or clearly connected to their faith. Therefore, in order to help youth tap into and reclaim the communal legacy of African Americans, I

⁴⁰³ Dale P. Andrews, 47.

argue that a stronger theological understanding of community must also be put in place, as well as a reorientation towards a “public theology.”⁴⁰⁴

In other words, while it is important to reiterate that spirituality entails more than individual prayers, concerns, and relationships with the divine; the question remains of what can the non-individualistic, non-private dimensions of spirituality look like? In response, I argue that a reorientation toward public theology helps us when thinking about spirituality that empowers youth to connect their understanding of God, as personally concerned and significant, with an understanding of God who is relevant to their concerns for the world and requires their agency and cooperation in responding to the communal concerns around them.

While I do not wish to conflate understandings of community with that of the public sphere, I argue that reconnecting with an understanding of community as central to our survival, liberation, and freedom includes a call to theologically reflect on and address issues of public (societal and political) concern.

What is Public Theology?

Admittedly the term public theology or public theologian is not without issues or problems; in some arenas it is highly contested.⁴⁰⁵ Also, it is difficult to succinctly define

⁴⁰⁴ How do we balance this with personal/private practices and communities of support that spiritually sustain this type of resistance and public work?

Is this where other elements of Womanist spirituality and practices of African American churches can be helpful?

⁴⁰⁵ While most scholars argue against public theology as an attempt to convert persons to particular religious views or faith tradition, the suspicion around religion and public life persist. Also, it is important to understand that public theology, the public engagement of issues of faith, or even because of one's faithful commitment is a modern/postmodern invention. Without the preceding separation of our lives into public and private realms and the attempt to relegate religion (and by extension theology) to private spheres, we would not need to discuss Public Theology. However, given our history –we have developed uneasiness about religion in the public square and particularly in government.

public theology.⁴⁰⁶ However, ethicist Robert M. Franklin's discussion of public theology is very helpful.⁴⁰⁷ Franklin in a sermon admonishing incoming students at Emory

University to offer a new type of leadership for the church and world states that:

Since the time of Reinhold Niebuhr, we have called them public theologians. [Public theologians] are women and men who take their faith out of the comfort of the sanctuary into the public square, of the nation and the globe. In times of stress and uncertainty, they 'go public' not to impose their faith upon other people, but to give voice and to give body, yes to embody, a radical idea. The idea that love is the greatest force available to humanity for solving its ills. Not the weak and superficial sentimentality that passes for love in our time. But, love as a force of the soul. Love as a movement of the Spirit. ***Public theologians show before they tell the world the meanings of faith, hope, love, justice, and reconciliation.***⁴⁰⁸

From Franklin's definition, I argue that first and foremost, public theology is theology and theological reflection that is not confined to individual lives or religious intuitions. Instead public theology risks vulnerability and scrutiny of one's deepest held convictions as it offers a response (from those convictions) to the needs of the community at large. Similarly, public theology also seeks the good of the community ahead of church needs

Even as a scholar of religion and a practitioner of Christianity, I am not always comfortable with religion in Public Life, because I am afraid that it will be an attempt at proselytizing or a complete disregard for any other views or beliefs. Despite my unease, there is both a tradition of bringing religion into the public square and a real need for us to draw upon the resources of religious traditions and communities.

⁴⁰⁶ It is important to note that my understanding of public theology is both shaped and placed into practice in my work with the Youth Theological Initiative, hosted at Emory University, Candler School of Theology.

⁴⁰⁷ Franklin was my first introduction to the concept of public moralists and public theology. He outlines his understanding also in Robert Franklin, *Liberating Visions*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

Elsewhere, I also draw on Duncan Forrester (2004). *The Scope of Public Theology*. Who writes that: "Public Theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes 'the world's agenda', or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and the reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth. It strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel..."

⁴⁰⁸ Robert Michael Franklin, Excerpt from "A Great Ordeal" A sermon delivered at the Fall Convocation of Candler School of Theology, Emory University on September 2, 2003.

or religious agendas. Public theology and a communal reorientation do not eliminate autonomy and self concern. However, public theology pushes us to take seriously questions of a common good and the survival and liberation of the entire community.

Similarly public theology, while emerging in and being grounded in particular religious convictions and institutions, is not designed to protect the rights and privileges of the institution at the cost of a larger goal or common cause.⁴⁰⁹ Instead, a reorientation towards a public theology pushes youth to draw on the resources of their religious traditions to offer distinctive and constructive response to the crisis of the community and world. Historian George Toulouse, reflecting on James Gustafson's understanding of public theology, writes: "...the church's task is to convey publicly the best that Christian tradition has to offer. Theology joins the conversation without apology...[and] must offer an interpretation of people and communities that take seriously their activities as moral agents."⁴¹⁰

In other words, public theology and a communal reorientation of adolescent spirituality is not an attempt to reduce spirituality to purely political action. However, participating in public theological reflection and action attempts to push youth to draw upon their religious convictions and ideals to work for a communal good. Reflecting on the legacy of Rauschenbusch, Joan Chittister reiterates the need to hold our public and

⁴⁰⁹This is an important distinction to make about Public Theology, versus any type of religion in the public square, because there are numerous examples of the interactions of religious communities and governmental agencies and policy makers to protect the rights of its members to practice as they believe or to worship where and how they want to worship. These are issues of great concern, but they are more aptly discussed as issues of jurisprudence or the separation of church and state. However, public theology or the work of the public theologian is not primarily driven by an attempt to protect the rights, and otherwise private beliefs and practices, of religious communities. Instead, Forrester notes that often the agenda of the public theologian looks like the agenda (or an agenda) of the community or world.

⁴¹⁰George Toulouse, 186-187

social work in balance with the personal piety and spiritual disciplines of Christian faith.

She writes:

Prophetic presence and personal piety, however, were of a piece in Christian life for Walter Rauschenbusch. One was not distinct from the other. The function of religion was not simply to believe what we were told we must. The function of religion, he taught, was to prod us to do what had to be done in this world because of what we believed. It was to save lives as well as souls.⁴¹¹

Chittister reminds us that religion should serve as a catalyst for action in the larger community. Along similar lines, Franklin lifts up the idea that public theologians are called to embody the radical idea that “love is the greatest force available to humanity for solving its ills.” Thus, a reorientation to a communal and public theology also reminds us of the significance of embodied theology; in that, public theology is primarily the way we “live out our faith.” In other words, public theology corresponds with particular and specific action in and on behalf of the wider public.⁴¹² Gustafson in an attempt to define

⁴¹¹ Joan Chittister, “Unless the Call Be Heard Again” in Walter Rauschenbusch, edited by Paul Raushenbush, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*. (New York: Harper One, 2007), 117.

⁴¹² Public theology, at its best, is theology that is relevant to the lives and lived experiences of all humanity and theology that challenges, critiques, and/or helps us make sense of the “stuff” of our lives. And even calls us to goals and interests beyond self-interests. In other words, public theology is the antithesis to much of privatized and individualistic spirituality that has emerged (also as a response to the privatization of religion). Public theology asks us and encourages young people to think about and reflect on how they can work for a common good and work to respond to many crises and issues they encounter in the world around them.

Public theology is theological reflection for the benefit of BOTH the church and the world. Theology can be simply defined as understandings and reflections about God, the world, creation, and humanity. Thus public theology is a theology and reflection that is both relevant to what is happening in individual, communal and global life, but also is an ongoing exchange or dialogue, where events in the world demand that we ask tough questions of God, humanity and our faith traditions, but also where our understandings of God and our faith traditions/practices, etc, inform how we act in the world. Thus public theology is an ongoing interaction between theological reflection and social criticism.

Public theology is demanding that our faith, religious, ethical beliefs, practices and traditions connect with Public life (and be an integral part of our public life). But it is even more importantly demanding that our experiences of public life (as we define the public in myriad ways – from a global or national political sphere to a smaller community or communal public) push back and demand something of our faith convictions.

While I am not attempting to denigrate the power of religious faith, beliefs and rituals in and of themselves; I believe public theology requires that there be something more to one’s faith than private rituals or beliefs. Public theology calls into question the public private divide—challenging whether it is possible or feasible for us to attempt to parse out our private beliefs from our public duties and

the essential elements of his understanding of public theology paraphrases Romans 12:1-2:

Individually and collectively offer yourselves, your minds, your hearts, your capacities and powers in piety, in devoted faithful service to God. Do not be conformed to the immediate and apparent possibilities or requirements of either your desires or the circumstances in which you live and act. But be enlarged in your vision and affections, so that you might better discern what the divine governance enables and requires you to be and to do, what are your appropriate relations to God, indeed, what are the appropriate relations of all things to God. Then you might discern the will of God.⁴¹³

* * *

Thus, building upon the complex legacy of African American Christianity I assert that there are alternatives to fragmented spirituality; and within African American communities of faith there are both the theological resources and practical strategies which will help youth embrace an integrated-integrating spirituality.

participation. Public theology says I'm looking within my traditions and worldviews to ask "God" what is it that you want me to do and what is it that we should be working toward so that all of humanity can thrive.

⁴¹³ James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Ethics and Theology*, vol. 2. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 327-238. Here I am indebted to George Toulouse's interpretation of Gustafson and the connections between theocentric ethics and public theology. See George Toulouse, *God in Public*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006)

Chapter Seven

Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Integrated-Integrating Spirituality

In addition to reflecting on the larger societal and historical trends that point towards religious fragmentation, and beyond arguing that there are alternative possibilities to fragmented spirituality, I assert that responding to fragmented spirituality among African American youth requires a rethinking (or at least a recommitment to the best practices) of pedagogical strategies in African American churches. The review of educational curriculum in African American churches and interviews with African American youth demonstrate the ways that educationally, communities of faith are perpetuating and failing to challenge fragmented spirituality. Therefore, in this chapter I look briefly at the pedagogical dimensions of fragmented spirituality and offer a pedagogical response to fragmented spirituality.⁴¹⁴ I begin with a review of the historical trends within the evolution of Religious Education in the U.S. and in African American communities, and then I outline the goals and preliminary strategies of a *Critical Pedagogy of Integrated-Integrating Spirituality*. As outlined in the introduction,

Integrated-integrating spirituality is spirituality that empowers youth to hold together the seemingly disparate arenas of their lives, to tap into the resources of their faith communities and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, in order to see themselves as capable of affecting change on individual, communal and societal/systemic levels.

⁴¹⁴ While I do not want to offer a great deal of additional criticism of the pedagogical structures in African American churches, a review of religious education literature about the Black church in many cases includes a harsh critique of current practices; and thus criticism becomes almost unavoidable. However, the larger part of this chapter focuses on the possibilities and strategies for improving educational ministry with youth in African American churches.

Pedagogical Dimensions of Fragmentation

Religious Education -- Purpose and Function

At the heart of any evaluation or discussion of the efficacy of pedagogy and educational curriculum lies the question of “what is the purpose or function of religious education?”⁴¹⁵ Despite the centrality of this question, throughout the history of religious education as a discipline and looking across the activities in which communities of faith participate we see that there is no precise consensus. For example, Karen Tye describing a conversation among members of a local church’s religious education committee notes that each member gave a different answer in response to the question of “what is it that we are trying to do?”

One [committee member] said the purpose of Christian education is to teach Bible. Another said that it is to apply Bible to life. A third committee member responded that it is to provide nurture and support for our personal faith journeys. A fourth person said that it is to transmit the Christian heritage to the next generation.⁴¹⁶

At the core of each of the responses is an articulation of the purpose and function of religious education within communities of faith. And while Tye’s vignette offers a description of four purposes, myriad additional responses can be added to her list. For example, many would add building Christian community and expand the ideal of “transmitting the Christian heritage” to include particular content areas: such as passing on an understanding of Christian evangelism or social witness, passing on a heritage of

⁴¹⁵ A more systematic evaluation of religious education and the educational ministries of communities of faith includes several questions that attempt to address the “purpose, context, content, and process/methods” of religious education. However, I focus initially on the question of the purpose and see that as essential or guiding the decisions that communities make in the other areas of religious education. Arguably, each of the questions are interconnected and one could focus on any and demonstrate the interconnectedness of each.

For a book length summary and treatment of these questions in relationship to helping communities of faith develop and evaluate their educational ministry see Karen B. Tye, *Basics of Christian Education*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

⁴¹⁶ Karen B. Tye, *Basics of Christian Education*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 21.

growing in personal salvation, and working towards personal, communal and societal liberation. Additionally, each person can make the case for why and how their particular assessment of the purpose of religious education is significant and meets the specific needs of their particular context. In other words, the array of purposes of religious education alone points to the ways that educational practices can and do perpetuate competing agendas within communities of faith and among its participants, and potentially points towards fragmented spirituality.

As noted in the previous chapters, the trends in the purpose and functions of religious education and emphasis do not occur in a vacuum. In particular, I have argued that the focus on personal and interpersonal themes in the sub-sample of Sunday school curricula and sermons from African American churches is not peculiar to this sample; but, they reflect changes within the larger society and connect with the privatization and individualism present in American religion in general. In other words, these trends point to the changing location and focus of religion and translate into changing purposes and emphasis in religious education.

For example, in recounting the history and development of religious education in the United States, Mary Boys focuses on two essential questions of “What does it mean to be religious?” and “What does it mean to educate in faith, to educate persons to the religious dimensions of life?”⁴¹⁷ Boys’ essential questions, as a framework for categorizing movements and “classic expressions” of religious education, demonstrates the interconnection of our understandings of both the content of religion and our understandings of what it means to be educated. Boys defines a *classic expression* of religious education as “specific, historical manifestation of educating in faith that has

⁴¹⁷ Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith*. (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 1989), 5

resulted from the intersection of a particular theological perspective with a particular educational outlook.”⁴¹⁸ Boys’ guiding questions push us to think through how our understandings of religion and religious education are historically situated, and how these understandings reflect specific theological and pedagogical commitments.⁴¹⁹

Boys discusses the historically situated classical expressions of: Evangelism, Christian Education, Religious Education, and Catholic Education.⁴²⁰ Although her larger analysis and descriptions are very thorough and complex, I lift up a brief articulation of the goals of each classic type to help us see her framework for the field of religious education and the myriad goals it has encompassed over the last century (or more). First, Boys defines *evangelism* as “preaching and teaching the Scriptures in such a ways as to arouse conversion”: the goal of *evangelism* education is to “deepen one’s personal conversion.”⁴²¹

In contrast to evangelism which was essentially a precursor to the field or discipline of religious education, *religious education* is defined as “the classic expression that weds classic liberal theology and progressivist educational thought.”⁴²² This classic

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 8

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 5

⁴²⁰ While Boys is offering a survey of religious education and typology similar to Jack Seymour’s sixfold typology and Harold Burgess’s four models outlined in *An Invitation to Religious Education* (1975), she offers a slightly different analysis of the field and history of religious education from both Seymour and Burgess. See Boys, 4 for a summary of the differences in their works and of Boys’ four types.

Boys also gives a thorough analysis of key thinkers in each of her classic expressions, as well as contemporary modifications to the classic types. She also describes each looking at the two essential questions of “what does it mean to be religious?” and “what does it mean to educate in faith?” – However she includes five secondary questions under each of these essential questions. (See pp. 5-10.)

What does it mean to be religious?

→ How is God revealed? What does it mean to be converted? What is faith? belief? How are faith and belief related? What is the role of theology? What is the relation of religion to culture?

What does it mean to educate in faith?

→ To what purpose does one educate another (or oneself)? What does it mean to know? To learn? What is the role of the social sciences in religious education? How shall we think of curriculum and teaching? In what way is education a political activity?

⁴²¹ Boys, 13, 33

⁴²² Boys, 36

expression was probably best exemplified in the work of early religious educator George Albert Coe, even though it also is heavily influenced by Horace Bushnell's understanding of Christian nurture (and not conversion as essential), and the experience-based education of thinkers such as John Dewey.⁴²³ Coe's work wrestled with the question of the purpose of education and faith, asking "Shall the primary purpose of Christian education be to hand on a religion, or to create a new world?"⁴²⁴ Coe argued against any understanding of a "private relation with God" but sought to remind Christians of their role in transforming society. Thus the goal of *religious education* was "the reconstruction of society, continuous growth, and formation of the whole child."⁴²⁵

In direct criticism of the liberalism of *religious education*, *Christian education* emerged among Protestant theologians who in many ways were attempting to demonstrate or "emphasize the distinctiveness of a Christian education."⁴²⁶ The classic expression of *Christian education* builds on the neo-orthodox theology of thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr,⁴²⁷ and sees the goal of education as "formation of faithful followers of Jesus and development of ecclesial commitment."⁴²⁸

Finally, Boys lifts up *Catholic education-Catechetics*, which represents "a Catholic philosophy of education" that was both operative before and after Vatican II and reflects the ongoing commitment of the Catholic Church with regards to education. Again

⁴²³Again see Boys, 36-50 for a discussion of the connections of religious education to each of these thinkers. Also see: George Albert Coe, *What is Christian Education?* (New York: Scribner, 1929) and Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

⁴²⁴Boys, 52. Coe's work is also highly connected with educational philosopher John Dewey, among others. Boys also describes the connection between Coe's understanding of religious education and the work of Paulo Freire. She points to the ways that both Coe and Freire, in a very different context historically and politically, affirm the work of education in transforming the world.

⁴²⁵Boys, 60.

⁴²⁶Ibid, 66.

⁴²⁷Boys also notes the way that Niebuhr took offense at the often blind or naïve wedding of middle class values with reason and education. Niebuhr did not hold Coe's "confidence that the power of religious education could reconstruct society" (66-68).

⁴²⁸Boys, 76.

Boys describes Catholic education as focused on “the formation of the human person with respect to his [her] ultimate goal, and simultaneously with respect to the good of those societies of which as a man [woman] he [she] is a member, and in who responsibilities, as an adult, he [she] will share.”⁴²⁹ In this way, the goal of Catholic education was to “form the whole person, to permeate all of life with God’s grace, and to achieve a person’s complete transformation, both as an individual and as a member of society.”⁴³⁰

From this snapshot of the classical expressions of religious education, Boys helps us to see both the complexity of the field of religious education and the often competing purposes espoused by particular groups in history.⁴³¹ In addition to Boys’ description of classical expressions, other scholars have offered descriptions of the purposes of religious education and the ways that these reflect the needs of particular historical communities. For example, moving beyond the recent history of the field of religious education, Walter Brueggemann in his discussion of the Hebrew Bible canon as a model for Biblical education, points to the multilayered purposes, strategies and emphasis in religious education as essential to formation of the early Hebrew community. While Brueggemann is not offering as detailed an account of the history of religious education as Boys, he attempts to look at the larger history of the Christian heritage contained in both the model and process of canonization of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, Brueggemann offers a tripartite

⁴²⁹ Boys, 81. Please note that here Boys is quoting Vatican II’s “Declaration on Christian Education”. Also the bracketed portions are added by Boys in her effort to be more gender inclusive.

⁴³⁰ Boys, 103.

⁴³¹ Boys’ schema is not a static snapshot and in the second part of her work she outlines ways that the field continues to evolve and the ways that each of the classical expressions are changing in recent history. Additionally, it is important for me to note that while her schema is primarily descriptive (not making a normative claim that one expression is better or more accurate than others), I do see my work fitting better with some classical expressions than others. However as I will argue below, I also want to move beyond the classic expressions to a place that balances these multiple emphasis and ways of responding to the question of what it means to educate in faith.

model of “Disclosure, Disruption, and Discernment” – which emphasizes educational goals of passing along a communal *ethos*, making room for the *pathos* of God (as experienced in the fractures between what is at hand and what is promised), and reminding the community through the “counsel of the wise” or *logos* that “there is sense and order and meaning to life.”⁴³²

Multiple Purposes and Directions in African American Religious Education

Similarly, African American religious education also exemplifies myriad themes and focuses. Looking at recent academic discussions of religious education in African American history and communities, we see an array of both purpose and process.⁴³³ For example, religious educator N. Lynne Westfield in her discussion of womanist practices of hospitality and pedagogy asserts that the “bottom line” among African American women and in their practices of religious education is justice. Westfield writes: “In retrospect, it seems rather clear to me that what the women are most interested in, engaged in, and invested in is justice...we want justice for our families, our friends, and ourselves. Our bottom line is justice.”⁴³⁴

⁴³² Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982). Specifically, I see a parallel between Brueggemann’s discussion of disclosure and the formative functions of religious education, disruption with the transformative functions, and discernment or the wisdom tradition as not necessarily offering another form of religious education, but in pushing communities of faith to develop methods of knowing when and how to live in community that balances the goals of formation and transformation.

⁴³³ My analysis does not include the direct perspectives of practitioners within a sample of African American churches, but I argue that their understandings of the purpose and goals of religious education would be equally, if not more diverse than the purposes outlined by African American scholars of religious education.

⁴³⁴ N. Lynne Westfield. *Dear Sisters: A womanist practice of hospitality*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 105.

Alternatively religious educator Anne Wimberly is her discussion of intergenerational African American Christian education names “liberation and vocation” as the central purpose or quest of religious education. In particular she argues that:

Persons are searching for forums in which they can address who they are and can become in their everyday social contexts...Whether persons attend church school, Bible study groups, youth groups, or other Christian education settings in church, home, or community, African Americans often tell of a deep inner yearning. This yearning is their soul’s search for liberation and vocation.⁴³⁵

While there is much in common between Wimberly and Westfield’s articulations of African American Christian education, Westfield’s understanding of justice as the bottom line and her harsh critique of the domestication of African American churches points to potentially significant differences in emphasis. Furthermore, within Wimberly’s discussion and definition of liberation, there are at least eight dimensions of liberation which point to the diversity of needs and struggles that African Americans are addressing, when they discuss liberation. Again the plurality of meaning and struggles both aids in our understanding of the complexity of striving for liberation, but it also makes clear the difficult tasks of working through each of these dimensions.

Furthermore, looking at the history of African American Christian Religious Education as a discipline and practices within communities of faith, Kenneth Hill outlines the many significant foci and changes within African American Christian education. Hill argues that recent developments in the field point to three distinctive directions, and by extension purposes, of research in African American Christian Religious Education: (1) formulation of a Black theology of education—that undergirds the relationship between

⁴³⁵ Anne Wimberly, *Soul Searching: African American Christian Education*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 15, 20. In this text, Wimberly also offers a description of “liberation from the inside” – offering eight dimensions of liberation and pointing the varied understandings of liberation at work within African American churches and communities.

theology and Christian education; (2) theory and practice of religious education – researching the relationship between theory and practice of Christian education in the African American church; and (3) spiritual direction – focusing on the spiritual formation, nurture, and development of African Americans.⁴³⁶ And beyond the diversity of directions in current research about African American religious education, Hill also points to a threefold emphasis in the historical legacy of African American Christian religious education. Hill defines the threefold emphasis as including *formation*, *information* and *transformation* and writes that, “The church, as the central institution in the Black community, has carried forth its educational ministry to form, inform, and transform people in Christ.”⁴³⁷

Although, I do not attempt to offer an in depth analysis of the purposes of religious education or even the purposes of African American religious education, this brief overview instead reiterates the many divergent directions that religious practices and religious education take. These areas, while necessary for meeting particular needs in communities of faith, also reflect the ways that communities and individuals of faith must attempt to balance each goal in order to educate members, and particularly youth, in full, robust and integrated spiritualities. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, the undergirding questions of “Do our educational strategies perpetuate fragmented

⁴³⁶ Kenneth Hill, 10-11

⁴³⁷ Kenneth Hill, 12. For a fuller description of Hill’s understanding of the educational ministry see pages 12-14. Hill’s understanding of formation, information, and transformation resonate with the overarching framework I outline below. But there are some distinctions. In particular, Hill describes the focus of each of these tasks as the individual—however I point to an essential transformative element of religious education as beyond the individual to focus on the transformation of communities and societal structures as well. Of course transformed individuals bring about this work, but the changed emphasis is more than semantics, in my opinion.

Later in this work Hill also outlines six contemporary approaches to African American religious education, each with a corresponding focus and purpose for religious education. See pp. 120-135 for a fuller discussion.

spirituality?” or “Are we teaching youth fragmented spirituality?” have persisted.⁴³⁸ And while I do not attempt to point to a single “cause” of fragmented spirituality, seeing the competing goals and foci even within educational strategies adds another layer of complexity to the task of responding to fragmented spirituality among African American youth.

Pedagogical Alternatives and Responses to Fragmented Spirituality

Tye, Moore, and Brueggemann, among others, argue that the diversity and changing purposes throughout the history of religious education and communities can be held together under a larger framework or purpose of educating for *continuity and change*.⁴³⁹ Brueggemann defines good education by the ability to hold these multiple goals together:

...I suggest that these tensions, imbalances, and possibilities in church education are not new matters...but the emergence of an overall canon in this threefold shape suggests that our community has always struggled with this issue...It is the invitation of canon to educators that we should have a varied repertoire of both mode and substance, and that we should have a keen sense of which season requires which part of the canon... For good education, like Israel’s faith, must be a tense holding together of *ethos, pathos, and logos*...Such education, such ministry rightly done is *radically subversive*. It evokes resistance and hostility. That should not surprise us. That indeed is the condition of church education. Any educator who hopes to avoid that abrasion by focusing on one aspect alone cannot claim to be facing the whole canon in all its richness. [emphasis original]⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ I have also wrestled with the more specific questions of “Do we train youth in ways that separate their faith into one arena or another? Do our goals of Christian nurture *only* or social change *only* reflect fragmentation of content and methodology?”

⁴³⁹ Tye builds directly on the work of Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982) 1,13. and Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 14. Both Brueggemann and Moore point to the ways that communities of faith must deal with passing on their particular Christian heritage and with adapting to the ever evolving needs of communities of faith.

⁴⁴⁰ Brueggemann, 13.

Essentially, Brueggemann argues that in order to seriously engage in the tasks of educating and being communities of faith, we have to deal with the “radically subversive” nature of ministry that comes with educating in such a way that balances creating communities on solid truths, rooted in the community’s history and heritage; remains open for the “freshness” or rupture that comes with prophetic words; and that pays attention to wise counsel.

Building upon each of these articulations of the purpose of religious education, I also discuss my understanding of the larger framework of religious education as both “forming” persons in the traditions and practices of a community of faith and as transformative of individuals, communities, religious traditions, and society as a whole. I want to further explore the ways that the formative and transformative functions of religious education are not mutually exclusive. In spite of the fact that throughout the history of religious education, as well as within particular religious communities, it can become difficult to hold these goals together, I offer this dual framework of formation and transformation as a scaffolding that surrounds a pedagogical response to fragmented spirituality and that empowers youth to integrate divergent goals, without becoming overwhelmed by them.⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴¹ I am in no way claiming originality in articulating the purpose of religious education as *formation and transformation*. As noted above both the terminology and idea that both are essential for religious education is espoused by several thinkers, including Boys, Brueggemann, and Hill. However, my introduction to this framework for religious education came in my work at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology as a Teaching Assistant and Associate for RE 501 Religious Education as Formation and Transformation. While I was not a participant in the conversations of Brian Mahan, Ted Brelsford, Mary Elizabeth Moore and others, who worked to revamp the introductory course in Religious Education at Candler, I benefited from their work and learned a great deal about the complicated ways that communities of faith struggle to hold these purposes together.

In particular, their understanding of the interconnections between faith and culture and the many ways that communities of faith have a responsibility to empower people to deal with many forms of oppression within societies as part of their transformative mission resonated well with my understandings of the purpose and potential of religious education in African American communities and with youth. For example, in the course description Brelsford writes:

In order to address the specific concerns of African American youth who are experiencing fragmented spirituality, in the ways illumined in this dissertation, I underscore the formative goal as one of reconnecting African American youth with the legacy of African American spirituality and forming them in the traditions of the Black Church. Intricately connected to helping youth *tap into* this legacy, I also describe the transformative goal of this pedagogy as building on the critical and radical pedagogical structures that address issues of conscientization, liberation, and vocation.

***Religious Education as Formation
Reconnecting with the Legacy of African American Spirituality***

To respond to fragmented spirituality among African American youth and to empower youth to reconnect with the legacy of African American Christianity and spirituality, religious education with youth must embrace the goal of *forming* youth in this tradition. Kenneth Hill describes the task of *forming* as focusing on the formation of communal identity, both by participation in a community of faith and as part of a shared legacy of overcoming oppression in the United States.⁴⁴² In other words, religious education as formation requires both reconnecting African American youth with the

In this course, we will explore practices and theories of religious education that aim to form, renew, and transform Christian faith in persons and communities ... rather than focusing only on dynamics education as formation of individual faith or as incorporation into religious communities, we will emphasize challenges for forming and transforming persons and communities in the face of the many forms of exclusion, oppression, and life-draining forces that exist in US culture and, therefore, within the church itself.

Because persons and communities always already exist within a wider cultural context, particular attention will be given to the interaction of faith and culture. Communities educate in the face of specific and often deeply rooted challenges that have been internalized from the wider culture. Some specific and persistently threatening challenges that pervade the United States culture and that manifest as distortions, oppressions and phobias of race, gender, sexuality, social class, and religion will be addressed in this course. We will explore ways that religious communities can engage these cultural challenges effectively through particular practices of religious education. We will explore educational theories and practices that might enable persons and communities to be fully the people of God they were created and are called to be. (RE 501 Syllabus Spring 2006)

⁴⁴² Hill, 12-13.

legacy of African American spirituality and forming them in the practices of the Black Church.

In the previous chapter, I outlined many essential elements of African American spirituality and theology which have empowered African American Christians to survive, resist, and remain faithful in the midst of oppressive structures and individual struggles.⁴⁴³ However, in many cases, contemporary youth have not benefited from this legacy. One of the major criticisms often recited in assessing the spiritual lives of contemporary adolescents is that their spirituality does not reflect the totality, complexity, or the richness of their religious traditions. For example, Evelyn Parker argues that the fragmented spirituality of African American youth is “historically inconsistent with the spirituality of African Americans of years past...” Parker contrasts their spirituality with exemplars of African American spirituality, such as persons like Fannie Lou Hamer.⁴⁴⁴ Many African American youth struggle to connect with or even see the value of this legacy, because of a lack of exposure to this history and because of the larger trends towards individualism that in many ways impedes any embrace of a communal legacy or ethic.⁴⁴⁵ For example, in an interview conversation on diversity within religious

⁴⁴³ See Chapter 6 above.

⁴⁴⁴ Parker, 37

On the other hand my own research and the research findings of the Nation Survey of Youth Religion (directed by Christian Smith) demonstrate that the religious lives of contemporary youth are direct reflections of the religious lives of the significant adults in their lives (namely parents). I do not lift this up to “blame parents or adults” for inconsistencies in youth spirituality; however, I recognize that in order for youth to fully live into and embody an integrated-integrating spirituality they must be exposed to this type of spirituality *and* nurtured in it.

⁴⁴⁵ As noted above educational curriculum designed specifically for African American urban youth does not consistently expose youth to the complex history of African Americans and/or their struggles of faith. Similarly, I found that the vast majority of the sermons sampled in this dissertation did not explicitly educate youth in regards to African American history and/or a particular communal identity as African Americans.

Much research also is needed to put the myriad anecdotal descriptions of youth as individualistic and/or narcissistic and the ways that youth demand and thrive in new forms of relationships and communities, such as online communities such as Facebook and Twitter.

communities, one young woman when asked what she was taught about African American history or whether she learned about the Civil Rights movement in her school or church responded:

My school, no way. I mean it's [African American History is] never really emphasized. I mean we don't even really celebrate Black History month. For that matter any other ethnicity's Holidays for that matter. I mean at church we do touch upon it. But I think they're almost kind of like well you know about that, you know. [Interviewer: They assume that you know.] Yeah, and so I mean like I know I can see that, but then it's definitely not emphasized as much as it probably could be.⁴⁴⁶

Her response summarizes a typical approach within communities of faith toward connecting youth to the legacy and history of African Americans. As noted above, living and being a part of racially similar groups does not equate explicit teaching and knowledge of one's history and traditions. Many predominately African American faith communities (particularly where the larger community is also African American) assume that youth already know the history, and therefore communities of faith do not need to rehearse that history as well. However, as the young woman's interview indicates, African American youth also recognize that much more can be said and taught about African American history in their schools and churches.

I suggest that despite this lack of ongoing exposure to African American history, there persist ways of empowering youth to connect with and benefit from this legacy. Here I briefly outline two pedagogical strategies: "Re-telling the Story" and "Re-connecting with Worship Practices" of African American Christian communities.

⁴⁴⁶ This interview was conducted during the Youth Theological Initiative Summer Academy 2003. The interviews focused on diversity and were conducted under the leadership of research director David White. I first analyzed this interview data as part of a research project exploring race and religious identity formation among African American and Latino youth attending YTI. My research findings are better described in an unpublished seminar paper: Almeda Wright, "Why are *all* the black scholars sitting in the conversation room? Why are *all* the white scholars sitting in the literary room? & Where should the one Latina and four Asian scholars be? Religion and Race Identity Development in the YTI Summer Academy" *Dynamics of Religious Communities*, Final Paper (Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore, Professor), Fall 2005.

*Re-telling the Story:
Formation in the Narratives of African American History and Heritage*

One of the foundational methods of reconnecting African American youth with the legacy of African American heritage and spirituality lies simply in reconnecting youth with the narratives of African Americans and “reminding” youth of the legacy of faith, resistance, survival, and liberation that permeates their communities of origin. Many scholars affirm the significance of reconnecting African American youth with these narratives;⁴⁴⁷ in particular religious educator Anne Wimberly’s *story-linking* methodology centers on the significance of narratives for the vitality of African American Christian Education. Wimberly describes story-linking as “... a process whereby persons connect components of their everyday life stories with the Christian faith story found in Scripture... [and] connect their personal stories with Christian faith heritage stories of African Americans found outside Scripture.”⁴⁴⁸ In this process, the sharing of narratives connects or reconnects the lives of youth with the historical and biblical narratives of African American and Christian communities.

Womanist religious educator N. Lynne Westfield further affirms the significance of narratives and storytelling in a liberative (or liberation focused) educational process. She describes the practice of “tell[ing] the story” as the first of many specific tasks within a Womanist pedagogy for both religious communities and seminary classrooms. Westfield writes:

The power of story to teach and transform cannot be overemphasized.
The dynamic possibilities of teaching are revealed in the practice of

⁴⁴⁷ These scholars include: Beverly Tatum, Janie Ward, Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Jawanza Kunjufu, etc. Others scholars also affirm the significance of narrative in general for education, as well as identity formation.

⁴⁴⁸ Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 13.

storytelling...the stories gave them new perspectives and reminded them who and whose they were. ...storytelling allows students, Black and White, male and female, to discover that they are not alone in their struggle for liberation. ...stories give us exemplars and encourage us towards actions of resistance and justice.⁴⁴⁹

While Westfield emphasizes the power of storytelling and narrative in general, Wimberly is clear that there is something powerful about linking the stories of our lives with the stories of our ancestors and faith exemplars. Also Wimberly's practice of story-linking itself serves as an example of reconnecting African American youth with their history and heritage, in that Wimberly models her method on the story sharing practices of Africans and African Americans from the early slavery period.⁴⁵⁰ Wimberly's method also reminds us of the importance of intergenerational story sharing. For Wimberly, the narrative process is essentially intergenerational, exposing youth both to the stories (the historical data) and to the embodied narratives (the exemplars of faith and wise persons within the community). In other words, telling their individual stories and affirming their own voices as youth is important; but it begins to counter fragmented spirituality (and the trends towards individualism) when youth are invited also to receive the stories that define who they are as part of a larger community. Thus building on both the heritage of Africans in the U.S. and upon the biblical witness that many embraced, it becomes imperative to not only tell stories, but to "tell the stories" – the narratives that affirm the central identity of who African Americans are and how they have survived.

Building upon the Hebrew Bible narratives which admonish the Israelites to build monuments and to encourage their children to ask questions such as "what do these stones mean?" biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann also affirms the significance of

⁴⁴⁹N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 118.

⁴⁵⁰Wimberly, 13

“telling the story.”⁴⁵¹ His work outlines the way that story serves to form a foundational communal identity and articulate the normative claims of a community (not in a strict catechesis mode), by inviting the young and old into a dialogue.⁴⁵² More specifically, in the Biblical tradition as well as in African American heritage, the method of inviting youth into the narratives of the community are typically initiated by the questions of the young—a process that encourages wonder and imagination, all in the form of asking “Why?” Brueggemann is also clear to point out that the response to these questions is not a detailed or direct answer, but the response remains simply: “Let me tell you a story” – inviting youth into the normative stories of the community. As noted above, in reference to the work of educator Kenneth Hill, forming a communal identity *has* been part of African American religious education; however, it must remain at the forefront as well. In other words, it is imperative that communities of faith share their communal history with youth and encourage youth to learn what it means to be part of the community, if they want to persevere as a community and to ensure that youth know who they are and what resources (in terms of legacy and shared wisdom) are available to them.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ Brueggemann, 14-15. Here he is referring to the Hebrew Bible passages of Exodus 12:26, Exodus 13:8, 14, Deuteronomy 6:20-21, and Joshua 4: 6, 21. He also writes that each of these formulaic question connect with part of Israel’s educational agenda of educating the young in the “normative” claims of the community (15).

⁴⁵² I often have to hold together the significance of normative claims for the formation of communities and my suspicion of how norms are formed. However, I appreciate the way that Brueggemann and sociologists such as Peter Berger reiterate the way that some normative values or stories function to provide coherence and stability for communities to exist. Peter Berger’s *Sacred Canopy* served as a foundational text in my understanding of the way that religion functions to create “world coherence and order” in the lives of so many. Also it is from within this sacred canopy that youth can find the comfort to explore, question, and respond to the many other aspects of their lives.

⁴⁵³ Of course, one of the major limitations of this method is that within African American communities and Christianity there has not been as clear a process of canonization where the community agrees upon which stories are normative and which ones can/should be passed. However, within most communities of faith, there are theological traditions (operational theologies) as well as narratives of how they came to be as a community that must be rehearsed for the younger and older members alike.

Also, our meta-narratives serve as important foundations which youth must be “nurtured” in. I am also very clear that these narratives may not remain unchallenged or unchanged throughout the life and

Forming Functional Theology

Furthermore, when we invite youth into dialogue around the normative stories of the community or encourage their questions of what things mean, we are also affecting the “functional theology” of youth (or attempting to affect youth spirituality on a functional level). Womanist theologian Monica Coleman defines functional theology as epitomized by the statement “... I don’t know how this works, but it makes me feel whole.”⁴⁵⁴ Here, Coleman is quoting an African American woman as she gathered to participate in an African traditional religious practice. Coleman builds on this statement in her description of a postmodern womanist theology and writes that the woman’s statement:

– reminded me [Coleman] that, even when we don’t understand it, most of us default to a functional theology—a theology that works for us at our most crucial moments. A functional theology cares little for systems and consistency; it’s the rock-bottom faith we cling to at two o’clock in the morning when we can’t sleep. ...⁴⁵⁵

Recognizing our propensity to cling to a “functional theology,” I have often wrestled with how persons of faith develop this functional theology and how we help young people develop a functional theology that can speak to and hold them in the face of their experiences, particularly those of violence and racism. Thus, I posit that telling and re-

history of a community; however, it is from within this narrative structure (foundation/canopy) that people learn to successfully navigate worlds and eventually to push beyond these narratives to also change worlds.

⁴⁵⁴ I also see a parallel between Coleman’s discussion of “functional theology” and the “embedded theology” that many persons who were nurtured in communities of faith hold tacitly. However, there is also a key distinction for me between functional and embedded theologies. Embedded theology connotes a somewhat pejorative sense that it is an unreflective and uncritical theology – it is a theology that we passively receive from our communities or that which communities embed in us (or indoctrinate us into). However, functional theology while having many of the same connotations – in that it may be uncritical and tacitly operating in our lives – also connotes a sense of being functional, in a therapeutic manner of empowering us to operate in a world.

For a brief discussion of embedded theology, see Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to Think Theologically*. 2nd Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). Stone and Duke define embedded theology simply as “the understanding (s) of faith disseminated by the church and assimilated by its members in their daily lives.” (133)

⁴⁵⁵ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 5

telling the normative stories aids in the development of functional theology; however, often it is not what we explicitly know or think that sustains us or pushes us onward in the midst of struggle. It is what we do that reflects our deepest beliefs; core (often tacit) knowledge; and understandings of who God is and how God is working in our lives.

Therefore, the second crucial method involved in the formation of youth into the history and spirituality of African Americans centers on reconnecting youth with the practices of African American individual and communal worship. In addition to the practice of telling the stories, youth have to be surrounded by and mentored into religious practices and disciplines that will form (and possibly challenge) their core and functional theology.⁴⁵⁶

*Re-connecting with Worship Practices:
Formation in the Disciplines of African American Spirituality*

While I would be hard-pressed to remember ever receiving a coherent set of beliefs or tenets of Christianity and/or African American history in my early experiences of religious education, undoubtedly my earliest memories center on worship and the many ways that the “kids” were invited to participate in worship. Every Sunday, we sang, prayed, read scriptures, listened to sermons, gave tithes and offerings, and fellowshiped for what felt like hours after worship. The core of my training and memories in religious education and the experiences that served to form my “functional theology” emerged from my participation in the communal practices of worship. However, beyond my experiences and anecdotal evidence; here, I briefly explore the ways that formation in the practices of worship also helps youth develop an integrated-integrating spirituality. As

⁴⁵⁶ In other words, part of the formative task of religious education is to help youth develop the disciplines or habits that become instinctual and functional in all aspects of the youth’s life.

noted above, Coleman argues that it is the functional theology that helps women continue to survive and work toward salvation – to continue to “make a way out of no way.” Reflecting on this concept, I emphasize that formation in worship practices empowers youth to participate in practices that communities have found to be reliable and helpful in resisting oppressive structures. Here again, I do not romanticize African American religion or Black Churches; however, I also do not want to overlook a tradition and set of practices that have sustained communities for centuries through horrific experiences.

In an effort to reconnect youth with the legacy and tradition of African American spirituality, we have to invite youth into the daily life and practice (spiritual disciplines) of African American spirituality and worship. Sociologist, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes in her description of the pillars of Afro-Christian worship outlines the centrality of Black Preaching, the Prayer Tradition, the Musical Tradition, and the Testimony Tradition.⁴⁵⁷ Gilkes also writes that these traditions have historically centered on the usage of the English bible and by extension enabled the formation of a biblical imagination. Expanding upon Gilkes articulation of the function and purposes of practices of African American worship, I suggest that reconnecting youth with worship practices will serve as the foundation from which youth can develop an integrated-integrating spirituality. In many ways, I see the practices of worship as the elements that will hold youth even as they critically engage and reflect upon their experiences in the world around them. In particular, part of the formative goal of religious education centers on connecting youth with the following practices and traditions of African American religious experience.

⁴⁵⁷Gilkes, 127-138.

Biblical Reading

The Bible historically and currently remains a central focus in African American Christianity. Within African American churches there is a long tradition of reading, listening to, and even memorizing and reciting passages from the Bible. In each of the educational resources analyzed above, biblical texts and images served as the core narratives and content upon which the lessons were formed. Even though one of my major criticisms of the sermons and Sunday school lessons was their lack of diversity and complexity in terms of the theological themes espoused, the materials still offer evidence of the importance of the Bible within African American Christianity. Part of the focus on biblical texts connects historically with the struggle for literacy among enslaved African Americans and the reality that if one knew how to read, during the slavery era, one was most likely reading the Bible.⁴⁵⁸ Beyond the pragmatic role (eg. availability of bibles) in early African American communities, the Biblical themes of exodus, liberation, promise, and hope resonated with the experiences of African Americans and persist in their contemporary religious language.⁴⁵⁹ Noting the prevalence of these themes and the way that the Bible continues to function in other practices, such as preaching, prayer, and singing, in African American churches, I argue that any discussion of spirituality and pedagogy needs to include an invitation for youth to connect with and embrace these themes and narratives. Furthermore, in order for youth to fully engage the resources of their religious lives they must begin with a core practice of their tradition, which focuses

⁴⁵⁸ Gilkes, 127. "Reading meant reading the Bible."

⁴⁵⁹ For a fuller accounting of the role of Biblical narratives and many prevalent themes within African American hermeneutics, see Cane Hope Felder, ed. *Stony the Road We Trod*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) or Vincent Wimbush, ed. *African Americans and the Bible*. (New York: Continuum, 2001).

on Biblical reading.⁴⁶⁰ As noted above, it is imperative for youth to know and rehearse the story—and the African American Christian story is one heavily interwoven with the Biblical narratives.

Prayer

Building upon the significant role of reading and hearing the Bible within African American Christianity, the “prayer tradition” forms another essential practice for youth. Prayer, in African American Christianity, is formal and informal, public and private, communal and individual. However beyond the modes of prayer, it is more important to note that within African American Christianity prayer is not simply a means of communicating with God, of asking God for “stuff”, or even a passive response when more direct action is not taken.⁴⁶¹ Instead, prayer goes hand in hand with working for and actively expecting God’s change and transformation in tangible ways in their current situations. Gilkes describes many narratives of the ways that women, often referred to as “prayer warriors,” prayed fervently for God’s direction and provision as they were actively engaging in various social struggles. For example, Gilkes recounts a narrative from an early church which was purchased by freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina at the end of the Civil War. In this narrative the prayer warriors prayed as the members of their community transported the money to the bank. They prayed during each leg of the

⁴⁶⁰ I am in no way equating the centrality of the Bible within African American Christianity with the way that the Bible functions within Fundamentalist traditions. Within African American Christianity there is a broad spectrum in terms of beliefs regarding the Bible – and many varied responses to questions of inerrancy, inspiration, infallibility, etc. However, these are not the major or essential questions at the center of the practice of reading and hearing Scripture within African American churches. Instead, African American Christianity has formed a canon of scriptures that undergirds their understanding of how God works in their lives and connects them, as a community, with the Ancient Hebrew people.

⁴⁶¹ Here I am referring to a more contemporary criticism of prayer as a “copout” or easy fix to many social issues. In many cases, prayer has been criticized as what a religious person does when they don’t know or don’t feel like putting in the effort to affect “real” change.

journey that their life savings would not be stolen and that the payments would make it on time, so that their dream of owning their own church could be realized.⁴⁶² Similarly, during the Civil Rights movement, many African Americans gathered for mass meetings to organize *and* pray – actively seeking God’s presence as they worked for change.

In these examples, we see a communal dimension of prayer that youth can reconnect with and that will empower youth to embrace the interconnection between prayer and action for individual and communal struggles and concerns. In particular, looking back at Kira’s example, we saw a young woman of tremendous faith who still struggled to connect her faith with a more nuanced strategy for acting in response to the violence in her community. In her interview, Kira starts her discussion with the statement, “Two things that I worry about ... and something I forget I need to pray about...”⁴⁶³ This simple sentence stands out as a reminder that even youth with a strong foundation in their worship community and with a strong individual prayer life need to be continually invited and reminded of the practices of prayer and the ways that it goes hand in hand with responding to issues in their communities. Other examples from the interviews and other narratives on the lives of African American youth, demonstrate that African American youth are participating in the practice of prayer. However, in order to foster a more integrated spirituality and one that empowers youth to continue integrating new experiences, youth must be reminded of the myriad ways that prayer functions.

⁴⁶² Gilkes, 134.

⁴⁶³ Kira’s Interview Transcript, pp 15-16, lines 730-743.

Singing

Music remains an essential element of African American worship and while there is great diversity within communities of faith regarding styles and genres of music, African American worship—from the earliest slave traditions to the contemporary evangelical mega churches—is almost synonymous with music and singing. Religious educator Yolanda Smith reflects on the powerful role of spirituals historically and for ongoing religious education. Smith outlines the ways that Negro Spirituals offer a framework for religious education that embraces a “triple heritage”: connecting youth with their Christian, African and African American heritage.⁴⁶⁴ However, beyond the theoretical framework, the practice of communal singing impacts a bodily way of knowing that connects individual worshippers with a larger community and experience of God’s presence.

Looking broadly at the practice of singing, Don Saliers describes the ways that communal singing shapes and produces a type of embodied and lived theology. Recounting the responses of a group of women when asked about their favorite hymns, Saliers writes: “Over time, participation in the practice of lifting their voices to God had worked in subtle and complex ways to shape basic attitudes, affections, and ways of regarding themselves, their neighbors, and God.”⁴⁶⁵ He points to the ways that the power of singing goes beyond the words of the song, but the practice informs a communal identity and ethic. The experience of singing also goes far beyond the moments when the songs are sung communally and connects people with the memories and experiences

⁴⁶⁴ Yolanda Smith, 1-6.

⁴⁶⁵ Don E. Saliers, “Singing our Lives” in: *Practicing our Faith A Way of Life for Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass, 179-193. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

where they first learned the songs and other experiences in which the song was sung or heard. Music becomes part of the body's memory.

Saliers also reflects on the role of music within African American traditions and describes another dimension of singing; in that, music has the power to “sound prophecy—to ring out in opposition to injustice.”⁴⁶⁶ Saliers lifts up the example of James Weldon Johnson's 1921 hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” which was later adopted as the Negro National Anthem. The song draws on biblical imagery while also testifying to the “powerful, graced experience of God discovered ...in the midst of their suffering.”⁴⁶⁷

In addition to the powerful legacy and educative role of spirituals and hymns for forming communal identities and sounding protest, it is also significant to encourage youth to explore all genres of music, historical and contemporary in African American Christianity and culture. For in music youth are taught essential Biblical narratives and theological truths, connected with other communities and moments of protest, and empowered to express their embodied knowledge of God, self and their neighbors.

*Testimony*⁴⁶⁸

Alongside the traditions of music, prayer, and the central role of scripture in worship, African Americans have continued a tradition of testimony and testifying.⁴⁶⁹

From my childhood in rural Virginia, I cannot remember attending a revival that did not

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, 190-191.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 191.

⁴⁶⁸ Portions of this section were previously published in “The Power of Testimony: Spiritual Formation and Ministry with Youth” in: *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, 182-195. (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2008).

⁴⁶⁹ Drawing upon the language of legal proceedings and courtrooms, giving a testimony involves a witness of some set of events sharing the truth/details of the event as he/she perceived, remembered, and experienced it. Testimony in the African American Christian worship experience involves a similar type of sharing an event as the person perceived it, but usually involves an account of Divine agency working in that event, either changing it or giving the person strength to endure it.

begin with a praise and testimony service—characterized by an elder standing to tell what the “Lawd” had done for her. The testimony services prepared the congregants for the remainder of the service and served as a forum for sharing struggles and transforming individual concerns into communal concerns. As, sociologist of religion, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes in her discussion of pillars of Afro-Christian worship:

Testimony transforms the collection of worshippers into a community. Oppression and suffering make testimony important for psychological survival. Testimony does not resolve black problems but does transform them from private troubles of distressed individuals into public issues of a covenant community... Testimony can be a form of protest.⁴⁷⁰

Gilkes discusses the ways that testimony is essential to forming community and creating the “shared experience” that Black religion addresses. She also argues that testimony served as “antecedents to movements for social change.” Thomas Hoyt also notes the community-building and change-producing functions of testimony sharing, in his discussion of testimony as a practice of Christian faith:

Although only one person may be speaking at a time, that person’s speech takes place within the context of other people’s listening, expecting, and encouraging. In testimony a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. Her individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷⁰ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 137.

Gilkes includes testimonies as a pillar of Afro-Christian worship, alongside biblical (KJV) references and imagination, preaching, prayer, and music. She discusses each from the perspective of black feminists and explores how they address issues of gender within Black churches and communities.

⁴⁷¹ See: Thomas Hoyt, “Testimony” in: *Practicing our Faith A Way of Life for Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass, 91-103. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). In the preface to this work Bass describes one of the guiding purposes of the work as offering “reflections on practices as a way of connecting our faith with our daily lives. It also opens a path of spiritual formation...the book represents a refusal to leave our beliefs in the realm of theory, insisting that they can make a difference in our lives” (p. xiii). The practice of testimony sharing is discussed in this context, demonstrating the ways for generations African Americans have been practicing their faith and always remaining hopeful that God had something to say or do or some way to be connected with their everyday lives.

Here, Hoyt points to the two dimensions of testimonies: to testify to the church and world about the action of God, and to testify to God, telling God the truth about themselves and others. The dual dimension of Christian testimony illustrates the many functions testimony has in African American churches.⁴⁷² Hoyt also illustrates the transformative power and call to action of the testimony. Hoyt asserts that, in the preaching moment, “...testimony requires a response from those who receive it. Preaching is a witness intended to evoke other forms of witness....The testimony of preaching is a prophetic testimony, one that makes compelling claims on both preacher and hearers”—calling communities to respond to God’s blessings *and* mandates for justice.⁴⁷³

Although many churches no longer include a testimony service in their weekly worship services, the practice persists in many and varied ways. Reflecting on the practice of testimony, I argue that it is essential to nurture youth in this practice, as the practice of sharing testimonies models for youth ways of sharing and addressing individual and communal concerns. I also found that practicing testimony sharing with youth serves to nurture youth in the legacy and narratives of African American communities and empowers youth to participate in transforming and renewing the traditions of African American communities.

The tasks of empowering African American youth to reconnect with the communal history and story of African Americans and nurturing youth in the practices of African American worship, however serves as only one dimension of a pedagogy that fosters integrated-integrating spirituality. Essentially, while it is imperative for youth to know their history and to be shaped by the practices which aided their ancestors, religious

⁴⁷² Hoyt, 102.

⁴⁷³ Hoyt, 98.

practices and spirituality are never static. To educate with a goal towards dynamic spirituality, pedagogy that pushes for transformation is also required.

Critical Radical Pedagogy
Religious Education as Transformation

bell hook's in the introduction to *Teaching to Transgress*, describes her understanding of the transformative dimensions of education, writing "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom."⁴⁷⁴ For hooks, education as transformation is transgressive, pushing beyond normative and acceptable boundaries, and a practice of freedom or liberation. When reading hooks' definition of "teaching and transgression," I initially struggled to explicate how religious education should also be about transgression. Beyond the historical, biblical, and popular religious usage of the word "transgression" to connote sin, the idea of teaching people to transgress remains problematic in religious circles. Often the perception is that one must teach people to conform or assimilate into the life and traditions of communities of faith. In the previous section, I too make the case that youth need to be nurtured in traditions and practices of African American communities and should learn *the story* – the normative claims and the canonical narratives which identify African American Christian communities. Recognizing the almost oxymoronic nature of teaching to transgress within religious communities, I find that hooks' work is invaluable to my understanding of the purpose and function of religious education with African American youth.

⁴⁷⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

Even as I stress the need for youth to connect with and draw upon the rich resources and legacy of African American communities, the process of being formed in these communities includes being formed in a community that is characterized by its history of fighting against oppression. Connecting with the heritage of African Americans includes connecting with the long and ongoing tradition of transgression – of not conforming to what was or is expected of African Americans or Christians as a people. Being formed in the heritage of African American Christianity includes being educated to transgress and to see education as transforming the traditional structures and boundaries of religious communities and society.

Therefore, in defining the transformative dimensions of religious education, I focus on religious education as (1) transformative of individual lives in community; (2) transformative of society and structures; *and* (3) transformative of religious norms and structures. The transformation of individuals, religious institutions, and society is intricately connected; however, I look at each individually and outline strategies that attend to the ways that each interconnects as part of a critical pedagogy of transformative religious education.

Religious Education as Transformative of Individual Lives in Community

Anne Wimberly, in the preface to *Soul Stories*, discusses the many dimensions of liberation and vocation which emerge from her research and ministry in African American Christian communities. She includes the narrative of one African American man who states: “When I think of liberation, what comes to mind, first, is the feeling of

being all right inside myself.”⁴⁷⁵ His statement reminds us of the profound reality that at the heart of discussions of transformation, liberation, and radical or revolutionary education, are the people who are struggling to “be alright” with who they are and how they are living in the world. In particular, Wimberly reminds us to attend to the personal (as well as systemic) dimensions of liberation, and to the ongoing process of liberation. Wimberly writes: “For this man and other participants... liberation is not a singular or one-time accomplishment. Rather it appears to be a multidimensional process that doesn’t stop.”⁴⁷⁶ From her work, Wimberly defines eight dimensions of liberation, which include:

1. *Liberation from self-denigration* – ...“knowing one’s life as a gift and oneself as a valued human being rather than being shackled by how society or anyone else sees you.”
2. *Liberation from material need*– Having the “wherewithal by which to receive and maintain, at minimum, the basic necessities of life.”
3. *Liberation from human disenfranchisement*– “To be equal participants and beneficiaries in the political, occupational, educational, residential, health care, and civic systems of the community and nation.”
4. *Liberation from dehumanization*– requires that people “experience respectful and just treatment by others, including family, friends, and others with whom they have daily contact.”
5. *Liberation from miseducation, no education, and no vision* – “Liberated people can see possibilities of breaking out of narrow boundaries of thoughts, knowledge, feelings, and limited beliefs in the self’s ability to act.”
6. *Liberation through significant relationships* – “recognizing their need to share themselves and their stories with others...”
7. *Liberation through religious transformation* – includes seeing “the difference between living that didn’t work for them and life in positive relation to God, self, others, and all things.”
8. *Accepting responsibility for the liberation of others* – “persons are never fully liberated until they become aware of others’ needs for liberation and accept as obligatory their responsibility for contributing to the liberation of others.”⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*. 22

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 23-24

⁴⁷⁷ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*. 24-26. The list and descriptions of the eight dimensions is a summary and paraphrase of Wimberly’s discussion.

Wimberly's articulation of the multiple dimensions of liberation further demonstrates the interconnection between the individual's quest for liberation and the systems and communities which must also be part of the ongoing process of liberation. Wimberly gives significant attention to the individual's role and the effects on each person in their quest for liberation. She describes her understanding of liberation as a view "from the inside" – indicating both that she develops this definition from the narratives of African Americans (insiders to their experiences) and that the definitions of liberation take seriously the prior, often internal reflections of each person regarding liberation.

Wimberly reiterates the ways that religious education that seeks to foster liberation and transformation must start with the yearnings and reflections of the "insiders." She writes:

The presence of these "views from the inside" underscores the importance of acknowledging the very real reflective activity in which participants are already engaged. It suggests that persons' liberation and enactment of vocation begin with them. ...the guidance leaders/teachers give to participants...should build on the participants' prior reflection processes.⁴⁷⁸

Essentially, Wimberly argues that liberation begins with the person and builds on their reflections. The role of the teacher in transformative and liberative education is not to impose the process of liberation; neither does the teacher bring about liberation for or outside of the reflections of the participants.

Similarly, Paulo Freire begins his seminal work, outlining the vocation of all people as "humanization" – the process of being and remaining fully human, despite the many attempts to thwart this process, such as "injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the

⁴⁷⁸ Wimberly, 22.

violence of the oppressors.”⁴⁷⁹ In his discussion of dialogical and liberative education, Freire also affirms the need for any efforts towards liberation and transformation to begin and connect with the individual and their questions. Freire offers “problem-posing” education as a corrective to educational practices which further reify oppressive structures, by depositing narratives and knowledge that continue the mythology that the oppressed are less than human or that humanization is not a viable possibility.⁴⁸⁰ Freire’s understanding of liberative education is built upon the acknowledgment of men and women as “conscious beings” – as beings who are both capable of and already engaged in reflection on the world around them. Thus, Freire rejects the dichotomy between teachers and students. Like Wimberly, Freire sees teachers and students as together in the learning process, jointly responsible for the learning and liberation; and there emerge teacher-students and student-teachers.⁴⁸¹ Furthermore, for truly liberative education that leads to transformation of the world, Freire argues that there must exist “a profound love for the world and people” and faith in humankind.⁴⁸² Freire describes this faith as:

faith in their [humanity’s] power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of the elite, but the birthright of all)... Without this faith in the people, dialogue is a farce which inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation.⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁹Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43-44.

⁴⁸⁰Ibid, 79. Freire argues that “problem posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—*intentionality*—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness.”

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 79-80.

⁴⁸²Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 89-90. This understanding of faith in humanity also connects with Carter G. Woodson’s discussion of the “miseducated” person. Woodson argues that many of the efforts to transform the conditions of African Americans in the U.S. resulted from other African Americans becoming “educated” in such a way that they were no longer of use to the community. Woodson argues that these “educated Negroes” had come to despise their own people and did not trust that the people were capable of change. See Woodson, *Miseducation of the Negro*. (Associated Publishers, 1933; repr., Chicago: African American Images, 2000), 44.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 90-91.

In other words, Freire recognizes that transformative education not only begins with humans, but must truly demonstrate love for humans and faith that they can participate in their own liberation and transformation of the world.

From Wimberly and Freire's discussions of the vocation and liberation of humans, I lift up one essential strategy of transformative pedagogy related to the particular goal of transforming individuals in communities. Affirming the value and humanity of each youth is essential for transformation to take place. Therefore, transformative religious education includes empowering youth in the development of healthy identity and self-esteem.

Daring to Be Somebody: Affirming Youth Humanity

One of the recurring issues in working with young people—even within paradigms that value liberation and within communities that have been historically oppressed—is the issue of whether youth should also be included in the quest for liberation. In particular the issue arises of whether youth, as children and adolescents, should already be full participants in their vocation, as outlined by Freire, of humanization. While there is no denial of the differences in development, maturation, and responsibilities of youth and adults; these differences should not result in the domestication of youth or serve to relegate youth to the role of observation or mere recipients of information and faith traditions.⁴⁸⁴ Instead, truly transformative religious

⁴⁸⁴ Educational theorists, David White gives a fuller discussion of the domestication of youth as a result of compulsory education and the changes in educational systems, so that youth became disconnected from the “real work” of adult life and in a sense warehoused into a subculture. See David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005). Also see Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1998) and Christina Rathbone, *On the Outside Looking In*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998) for other narratives about the culture of young people that develops in and

education takes seriously the process of empowering youth to know and value who they are, right now as young people, as well as connected to a larger community and history.

Womanist Theologian Jacquelyn Grant, in her discussion of theology and ministry with youth, writes that Christian education and theology with youth must help instill a sense of *somebodiness* in youth. Grant describes the idea of *somebodiness* as an affirmation of the humanity of black people, but particularly of youth.⁴⁸⁵ Religious education as transformation must overturn notions that youth are not fully human. For the most part this is not stated explicitly, but in many cases churches and the larger society treat youth as “almost humans” because of their on-going biological, social and psychological development.⁴⁸⁶ However, Grant reiterates that despite this development, children and youth are already fully human.⁴⁸⁷ She writes: “While a black theology affirms the humanity of blacks in general, I would argue that special attention must be given to the humanity of youth. Black theologians must be willing to examine and challenge the church’s assumptions about youth.” In other words, Black theology and religious education should work to remind youth and others of their *somebodiness*.⁴⁸⁸

Grant, along with hooks, Wimberly, Freire, and others, describes an understanding of the essential role of education in the process of affirming *somebodiness*.

around public schools, and the resulting ways that many youth become disconnected from adult worlds and/or become seen as somehow distant and alien to the processes that also affect and shape their lives.

⁴⁸⁵ Writing in the 1980s, Grant borrows the idea of “*somebodiness*” from the practices of Jesse Jackson during the 1980s, where he encouraged youth to chant: “I am somebody. I may be poor, but I am somebody.” See Grant “A Theological Framework” in *Working with Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry*, eds. Charles Foster and Grant Shockley, 55-76 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69.

⁴⁸⁶ This posture is similar to the ways that dominant groups have dealt with other oppressed groups.

⁴⁸⁷ Grant outlines three assumptions at the foundation of her understanding of ministry with youth: 1. Black young people are not in process of becoming human; they are indeed human. 2. Something is wrong with Black youth. 3. Black youth ought to be black youth (not white youth, nor adults of any race)., p.71.

⁴⁸⁸ See Jacquelyn Grant, “A Theological Framework” in *Working with Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry*, eds. Charles Foster and Grant Shockley, 55-76 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69.

In particular Grant argues that even though the vast majority of public schools lose African American children at a very early age;⁴⁸⁹ Black churches have a responsibility to educate youth and empower youth to resist efforts to dehumanize them or limit their understanding of who they are and who they can become. As noted above, Wimberly defines the interconnected dimensions of liberation from self denigration, from dehumanization, and from miseducation and no vision.⁴⁹⁰ Liberative and transformative education must continuously affirm the humanity of the participants and the value of young people as they currently are. In the Christian context, this includes reminding youth of their value to God, but it also includes empowering youth to understand what they are capable of. Reaffirming the humanity and value of young people also includes the difficult task of empowering youth to work through the myriad myths that adults and larger society often perpetuate about youth.

Often, developing one's self esteem and identity is seen as a purely individual and personal work. However, womanist scholars call attention to the ways that encouraging youth to be womanish or

outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* ... Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. ... Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ Grant references the work of Carter G. Woodson who underscored the ways that in order for Black youth to be successful in American educational systems they had to learn to hate Black people. She also looks at more contemporary theorist, Jonathan Kozol who pays close attention to the ways that the cultures of Africans and African Americans are described in U.S. textbooks, as late as the 1980s. His other works, such as *Savage Inequalities*, illumines the tragic differences between schools in poorer communities (typically serving children of color) and school in more affluent neighborhoods, often in the same city.

⁴⁹⁰ Wimberly, 24-26

⁴⁹¹ For the full definition of Womanist, where she also outlines the common understanding of the folk expression "womanish" see Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

directly challenges hegemonic structures.⁴⁹² For example, for African Americans and women, particularly young African Americans and young women, to be educated—engaging in the processes of knowledge acquisition and production—has historically been an act of resistance and a direct challenge to hegemony. Hegemonic structures often attempt to uphold the myths that youth, African Americans, women, etc. cannot be educated or should at best stay in their “place.” Thus, religious education as transformation of individuals does not simply affect the spirits and identities of individuals, but also affects the ways that each individual works together in the larger community and world.

Transformation of individuals includes much more than simply changing how they see and understand themselves; however, this is an essential step in the process of transformation. While youth have to participate in their own transformation by acquiring skills and resources to succeed; alongside acquiring skills for success in the current system youth must also learn to *read* and ask questions of whether the *world-as-it-is* is how it should be. Therefore transformation of individuals – including helping youth to recover their individual and collective voice, transforming youth self perception, and encouraging youth toward personal achievement—also challenges and transforms institutional and societal myths and structures.

⁴⁹² Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9. Townes writes that an accusation of being womanish became a “warning about the dangers of Black girls moving beyond prescribed cultural boundaries and socioeconomic determinants. A womanish Black girl must not only be in charge, a gatherer of knowledge, but she must also be serious about her task. Who she is makes her dangerous to hegemony.”

Religious Education as Transformative of Society and Structures

All education is political, especially religious education; in that, all education has implications for how we live in society and how we engage the structures and systems around us. In this section, I continue to explore hooks' description of education as the practice of freedom alongside other theories of education which include the social and political practices of education.⁴⁹³ In the previous chapter, I describe some of the theological claims that present alternatives to fragmented spirituality, such as public theology and cooperation with God. Building on these concepts, I describe the ways that religious education is also about empowering youth to work in the world, with God, to transform that world. However, historically the idea that society, institutions, systems or structures could be changed has eluded adults and youth alike.

The possibility of transforming the world is designed to be daunting. It is in the best interest of oppressive powers and structures for young people to buy into the idea that “there is nothing that they can do”; or that all they can hope for is survival in a world which they have no control over. However, many critical theorists and radical educators have worked for centuries to remind students, that the world and humans are interconnected. Looking again at the work of Brazilian revolutionary educator and critical theorist, Paulo Freire writes “Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [woman] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality

⁴⁹³ Much of my understanding of the interconnection of the personal and political in education emerged from my experiences in public or secular educational settings. In this section I draw heavily on the work of “secular” or not specifically religious educators, partly because many of the conversations around critical pedagogy with youth are still taking place primarily in debates around schooling and public education. However, as noted above in some of the earlier strands and tradition of religious education, outlined by Mary Boys, there is an entire tradition or classical expression of religious education that also connects social transformation and religious education.

apart from people.”⁴⁹⁴ The significance of this interconnection is that it reminds us that the world can be changed and influenced by the collective work of individuals. Freire, who is best known for his criticism of the banking model of education, in which students are simply the depositories of expert knowledge and narratives, underscores the ways that liberative education transforms the world. As noted above, Freire pushes for “problem-posing education” which builds on the questions and critical reflections of persons in community as the basis for education. This method of education resists any notion that the world, systems or society is an unchangeable reality.⁴⁹⁵

The tension of holding together humans and society (and by extension the personal and private with the communal and public) in education is also echoed and wrestled with in the work of educator Henry Giroux. In a critique of both traditional and radical approaches to education, Giroux argues that we can never abandon the dialectic between human agency and societal structure.⁴⁹⁶ Giroux notes that while radical educators expose the relations between schools, the larger society, power, domination and liberation, they often fall into the traps of either *idealism* or *structure and domination*. Giroux defines the trap of idealism as the trend to “collapse human agency and struggle into a celebration of human will, cultural experience, or creates classrooms of happy social relations.” Likewise, the trap of structure and domination removes human agency from the equation. Instead, it presents the perspective that “history is made behind the backs of human beings” and that in the course of such domination human agency

⁴⁹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 81.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 83

⁴⁹⁶ Henry Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education*. (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1983), 5 Giroux uses “agency and structure” to refer to a focus on human agency or structures and systems within society. He argues that both must be included in any discussion of transformation and critical pedagogy.

virtually disappears.⁴⁹⁷ Neither of these positions is sufficient or accurate for Giroux; instead, he draws on critical theorists who provide a “mode of critique that extends the concept of the political not only into mundane social relationships but into the very sensibilities and needs that form the personality and psyche.” He argues that critical theorists refuse to abandon the dialectic of agency and structure. And they take seriously the claim that *history can be changed and that the potential for radical transformation really exists*.⁴⁹⁸ Essentially Giroux is arguing for a way of thinking about transformation that takes seriously humanity’s ability to work for change on individual and systemic levels.

Beyond, asserting that humans have the ability to transform society, religious education as transformation also pushes us to educate youth in ways that bring about transformation. Allen Moore, in his work *Religious Education as Social Transformation*, expounds upon the interconnections between religious education and transformation within society and societal structures. Moore’s vision is that religious education is an ethical way of life that serves to transform religious platitudes into concrete social structures that are just and serve the welfare of all people.⁴⁹⁹ In other words, the transformative elements of religious education with youth, requires inviting youth into the practices of critical reflection, imagining or dreaming of an alternative reality and acting to achieve these alternative visions. Freire outlines the practice of critical consciousness in conjunction with his idea of dialogical education. The process of coming to critical consciousness about the world and being in the position to truly

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid. Giroux discussion of critical theory utilizes the “Frankfurt school—theorist such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse” as well as the work of Antonio Gramsci.

⁴⁹⁹ Allen Moore, ed. *Religious Education as Social Transformation*. (Religious Education Press, 1989), 1-10.

transform the world requires both reflection and action, or what Freire defines as *praxis*.⁵⁰⁰

Conscientization and Ongoing Critical Reflection and Action

Directly connected with the work of transforming the ways that young people see themselves and form or transform their identities is the need to engage youth in the process of *conscientization*, or coming to critical consciousness. Coming to critical consciousness is not simply raising awareness about issues in the lives of young people. Critical Consciousness includes transforming how youth perceive the world around them and awakening within youth the ability to critically reflect on and take action in their worlds.⁵⁰¹ Freire in his discussion of dialogue and dialogical education writes that “there is no true word that is not at the same time praxis.”⁵⁰² For Freire, dialogue is significant because it points to a reordering of the educational and societal structures by placing two equals, two subjects into conversation or dialogue with one another. Thus for Freire, to truly be in dialogue or to “speak a true word is to transform the world.”⁵⁰³ It is incorrect to read Freire’s discussion of dialogue and dialogical education and assume that he is referring simply to encouraging people to talk with one another or even encouraging young people to speak their minds. Instead, in order to understand what Freire is calling for, we have to see that true dialogue is not common and does not take place without by its very nature being transformative. Freire states that dialogue, or speaking a true word, cannot be done for another person, nor can it be done alone. Dialogue and coming to

⁵⁰⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 87. Freire repeatedly cautions against attempting to have only action or only reflection. He argues that without action, there is a tendency towards *verbalism* and without reflection it is *activism*.

⁵⁰¹ Freire defines coming to critical consciousness or *conscientização* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.” Freire, *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, 35 (see translator’s note).

⁵⁰² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 87.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

critical consciousness is a mutual process.⁵⁰⁴ When true dialogue takes place, it turns structures and systems of domination on their head. Similarly when people engage in the process of critically reflecting on the systems of injustice, in which they are surrounded, and begin to act in response to their new understanding, structures are transformed.

Religious educator, Katherine Turpin expands upon Freire's understanding of conscientization, recognizing the difficulty in directly translating Freirian pedagogy to a U.S. consumerist context. Turpin argues that "Freire was able to assume that once participants in culture circles become able to name their own oppression, they would be motivated to resist this oppression through collective action." However, reflecting on her context of working with middle-class American teenagers, Turpin found that often "awareness of our 'caughtness' in this system [of consumer capitalism]...seems to engender feelings of guilt or powerlessness rather than motivation for resistance."⁵⁰⁵ Turpin instead proposes the idea of *ongoing conversion*—emphasizing the idea that within each youth there remains a paradox in what one is aware of and how one chooses to act in the world. On-going conversion instead emphasizes the way that transforming

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Katherine Turpin, 56. Turpin is looking specifically at the ways that religious education can "address the impact of consumer culture on vocational imagination." (57)

Another dimension of translating Freirian pedagogy to a U.S. context that Turpin does not spend a great deal addressing is the fact that within the U.S. structure there appear to be less clearly defined lines between the oppressed and the oppressor, or the process of becoming aware of these lines remains difficult. Also Turpin is aware of the challenges of working with middle-class, and I would say European, American youth, who are indeed part of the oppressive structure. The dynamics of being part of the "oppressor group" if you will, requires a different starting point than working to transform the world from within the oppressed group. Thus Turpin is correct that raising awareness about one's role as an oppressor within an oppressive structure is quite difficult for youth to grasp and the metaphor of conversion offers more "grace" in regards to how young people come to see themselves. However, I am hesitant to give up Freire's language of critical consciousness and his understanding of dialogical and revolutionary education; because it reminds us of the often urgent and life altering ways that oppressive systems have become the fabric of our beings and how they persist in our society.

Furthermore, Turpin appears to focus on the work that individuals should do in "resisting" consumer culture or converting from consumerist faith. And while she underscores the systemic nature of consumerism, she does not fully push her work beyond empowering youth to do small acts of resistance, to also imagine means of reworking the entire system. Thus, I value Turpin's pragmatism, but I see the need to keep revolutionary ideals and possibilities in the conversation as well.

the world, and how youth act in the world, is not a “one time thing”; neither does it emerge simply from seeing things differently. Turpin argues that conversion requires a “deeper change.” Turpin defines conversion, writing: “Conversion, then refers not just to a change in awareness and understanding, but to a change in both our intuitive sense of the way the world is (imagination) and our capacity to act in light of that intuitive sense (agency).”⁵⁰⁶ Building on Freire’s understanding of conscientization and Turpin’s understanding of on-going conversion, I argue that transformative religious education, specifically education geared towards transforming society and structures, must include an understanding of *ongoing praxis*: an ongoing process of critical reflection and action in the world around them.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁶Ibid, 59. While I agree with Turpin’s hesitation to embrace Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy in working with middle class European American youth. (I recognize the many ways that seeing oneself implicated in oppressive structures and even as eagerly participating in an oppressive, exploitive system can serve to immobilize youth, as they begin to wrestle with what Freire refers to as the “oppressor within them”) Furthermore, I also understand her preference for the metaphor of “conversion” in her discussion of consumer culture/faith; however, I am not sure she fully represents Freire’s pedagogy in that Freire is not naively suggesting that *simply* raising awareness catalyzes or brings about revolutionary change.

A more accurate critique of Freire could center on the fact that he does appear to focus primarily on action that results from change in awareness; without giving attention to action which leads to changed awareness or changed commitments. For example, in *Education for Critical Consciousness* Freire writes, “It so happens that to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceived a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts.” (39). Thus I appreciate Turpin’s call for on-going conversion in that it explicitly attends to the ways that youth need to enter the process of transformation and be supported as they struggle with the dueling convictions, perceptions and allegiances within them.

⁵⁰⁷ Both Freire and Turpin offer concrete strategies and methodologies for empowering people to engage in the process of critical reflection. Other religious educators, such as David White also offer a model of discerning and perceiving more clearly how one should act in response to the deep passions which emerge or the places where youth experiences injustice. White’s method parallels with Freire’s praxis model, but also includes: Listening, Understanding, Dreaming, and Acting. See David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005)

Religious Education as Transformative of Religious Institutions, Norms, and Practices

This paper is a frank attempt to express my belief that the Christian Church will do nothing conclusive or effective; that it will not settle these problems [of the color line in the U.S.]; that, on the contrary, it will as long as possible and wherever possible avoid them; that in this, as in nearly every great modern moral controversy, it will be found consistently on the wrong side and that when, by the blood and tears of radicals and fanatics of the despised and rejected largely outside the church, some settlement of these problems is found, the church will be among the first to claim full and original credit for this result.

– W. E. B. Dubois⁵⁰⁸

...a world of religious institutions that have, in the main, come to support and justify the status quo so that today organized religion is materially solvent and spiritually bankrupt. We live with a Judeo-Christian ethic that has not only accommodated itself to but justified slavery, war, and every other ugly human exploitation of whichever status quo happened to prevail.

– Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*⁵⁰⁹

In addition to empowering youth to know and tap into the history and legacy of African Americans, education that fosters an integrated-integrating spirituality requires that youth are also empowered to ask questions of this history, to critically reflect on it and to even move beyond the historical trends and accomplishments to do “a new thing.” As we encourage youth to critically reflect on the world around them and on myriad social issues and structures, it is equally important to encourage youth to critically engage religious institutions, norms and practices. In tandem with inviting youth to participate in religious communities and practices, we must also fully include youth in the constant transformation of these practices. Youth must resist oppression, and *reject* oppressive narratives and practices within communities of faith. The idea of transformative religious education becomes farcical if or when we put limits on what youth can question, critically engage, or work to transform. While, presumably religious institutions are included in any analysis of society and social structures, I want to pay attention to the

⁵⁰⁸ Phil Zuckerman, *Du Bois on Religion* (New York: Altamira Press, 2000), 174.

⁵⁰⁹ Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. (New York: Random House, 1989 [1971]), 14.

specific ways that transformative religious education must include ongoing critical reflection on faith traditions and practices—to ensure that the traditions that we espouse as affirming life do not morph into dehumanizing ones. In other words, truly critical pedagogy must also include room for reflection on the pedagogy and the tradition.

Ongoing critical reflection is a good practice in general; however, the need for critical reflection on religious norms and traditions is necessary because of the many places in history where religion and religious institutions have not been on “the right side” of struggles for justice. As noted in the quotes from W.E. B. Dubois and Saul Alinsky, religious institutions have often perpetuated and maintained the status quo, or at best been reluctant to intervene in breaking down systems of oppression. It is important to also note that contemporary scholars continue to launch this critique towards religious institutions in general, but also towards the Black church. For example, Womanist religious educator N. Lynne Westfield offers a scathing critique of the domestication of both public and religious education in the post-civil rights era. Westfield writes:

Too many Black churches are intoxicated by the post-civil rights malaise and entombed into a misguided, sanctimonious capitalistic funk. African American women...have not abandoned the agenda of justice and liberation. Learning from these women may simply mean putting the agenda of justice back in our churches and seminary classrooms. I am suggesting that the domestication (the taming, the acculturation of a post-slavery mentality of passivity, steeped in capitalistic values that demand compliance with our own oppression) of our churches and our church education must cease... The educational agenda must reflect the reality of oppression, and equip students, of all races and each gender, for the battle of liberation.⁵¹⁰

Within this critique Westfield suggests that religious education in African American churches should take seriously the lives and practices of its members and resist the temptation to overlook the existence of oppression and injustice within their lives. In

⁵¹⁰N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 108.

other words, by remaining silent religious institutions become complicit, if not the direct agents of oppression. Thus it is imperative that part of any educational plan that seeks to truly encourage youth to integrate their spirituality with their concerns for the world and struggles to live into their vocation, must also include space for reflection on and questioning of the tradition.

Walter Brueggemann, in addition to his discussion of the centrality of narratives, or Torah learning, in Biblical education, points to the ways that the Hebrew canon and model of religious education includes elements that guard against traps that come with educating in only one mode. He writes,

...if a community educates only in Torah, it may also do a disservice to its members. It may nourish them to fixity, to stability that may become rigidity, to a kind of certitude that believes all of the important questions are settled... That is why alongside of the Torah, there is a second division of canon...⁵¹¹

Brueggemann argues that the prophetic writings introduce an element of “disruption for justice.”⁵¹² In contrast to the Torah, or normative narratives, which are the fixed and foundational consensus elements of the communal identity, the prophetic word is “immediate, intrusive, and surprising. It is not normative. It is not known in advance...it is not known until it is uttered.”⁵¹³ The prophetic word represents a break from the norms and “transgression” of normative narratives, practices, and even communities. Prophetic education is intended “to nurture people in an openness to alternative imagination which never quite perceives the world the way the dominant reality wants us to see it.”⁵¹⁴ Thus,

⁵¹¹ Brueggemann, 40.

⁵¹² Brueggemann, 40.

⁵¹³ Ibid, 41.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid, 47

religious education that takes seriously prophetic breaches and disruptions must include openness to “new revelation” and a faith that “God is still speaking.”

However, Brueggemann cautions that “new revelation” is by its very nature problematic. It raises the question of authority and how we determine what is “true” or legitimate. For example, many of the Biblical prophets were considered marginal or peripheral characters—representing sources that were not legitimated. However, it was often because of this marginal status that the prophets were able to see or make such proclamations. Brueggemann argues that:

... we are immediately pressed to recognize that new revelation must come from unlegitimated sources because there is a closed circle between old revelation and its proponents. That circle will be broken and shattered only by a new voice which has no such vested interest...new truth is likely to be a *cry* from “below,” not a *certitude* from “above.”⁵¹⁵

In a sense, Brueggemann is reminding communities of faith that, while prophetic words are rare and hard for us to comprehend (or accept even when we receive them), religious education needs to nurture within youth an awareness of attending to the marginal voices and speaking up when/if we feel our voices are being marginalized.

Speaking and Being Open for a Prophetic Word

Therefore, connected with the goal of transformation of religious institutions and traditions, I suggest that a critical pedagogy of integrated-integrating spirituality includes the strategy of encouraging youth to speak and hear prophetic words. I am careful not to victimize or romanticize youth, suggesting that young people do not have a vested

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, 62-63. Brueggemann further argues that “New truth from God is likely to come as a cry and a protest of the weak, the powerless, the disinherited ones.” He lifts up the examples of ecclesiological issues and injustices, such as the ordination of women and makes the case that the cry for a “new revelation” about women’s ordination and leadership is less likely to come from those who are stake holders in the “old revelation”.

interest in the old or normative traditions. Neither do I suggest that all youth, or even all African American youth perceive themselves as living on the periphery, particularly within their faith communities. However, I assert that youth should participate in the practices of speaking truth to religious power. This practice empowers youth, as well as adults, to constantly listen for and expect God's new and ongoing revelation—a revelation which is often revealed in the cries and deep passions of the people. For example, Evelyn Parker discusses the ways that African American youth experience rage and anger. These emotions do not fit well within the religious or cultural norms; however, in many cases this rage is an indication of the passions and outrage of Black youth and their responses to perceived and real injustices. Parker argues that youth should not be forced to simply tone down their anger, but transformative pedagogy should foster listening and encourage youth as they experience these moments of truth within systems of injustice and oppression.⁵¹⁶ Parker outlines a framework of *holy indignation* which she defines as a “form of constructive rage. It is the freedom to express anger against injustice in the sacred space of the Christian church and also the public square of North American society.”⁵¹⁷ Similar to Brueggemann, Parker's framework opens the sacred space of religious institutions to also include the prophetic and sometimes enraged testimonies of African American youth.

Along similar lines, many religious educators also emphasize the many ways the mere act of listening can be transformative. In particular, Jennie Knight discusses the

⁵¹⁶ Evelyn Parker, “Sanctified Rage” in: *Children, Youth and Spirituality in Troubling Worlds*. eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, 196-209. (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2008). Parker outlines several examples of ways of tapping into the rage of Black youth and reconnecting it with the traditions. I am more hesitant to offer strategies or example of how this rage can be used to benefit churches, etc. (not because I believe that it cannot happen), but because I am uncertain that any way that I perceive or name as “appropriate” for expressing “Holy Indignation” would not already demonstrate a domestication and attempt to normalize the breach youth are naming/calling for.

⁵¹⁷ Parker, 197.

often troubling and problematic nature of listening with youth. This is in part because adults are not prepared for what they hear and often because youth cannot make sense of what they have to say, either. Furthermore, prophetic words are not easily reintegrated into the norms of the community – they create a breach. By encouraging youth to speak and listen for these prophetic words, we are attempting to awaken in them a strategy for not only seeing issues in their communities, but also working to change them. Knight recounts examples of the ways that listening with youth transformed the ways that communities of faith interacted with each other and in their larger context.⁵¹⁸

Fostering and nurturing an integrated-integrating spirituality is an arduous and complicated task. However, just as there are theological norms that offer alternatives to fragmented spirituality, robust pedagogy and methods of educating young people in a more holistic and integrated spirituality also exist. In spite of the myriad goals and foci of religious education, the dual goals of education for formation and transformation encompass the need to help youth tap into the resources and practices of their faith communities, while encouraging youth to critically engage and transform the world and their traditions.

⁵¹⁸ See Jennie Knight, “Transformative Listening” in *Children, Youth and Spirituality in Troubling Worlds*. eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, 226-240. (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2008).

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

There's Hope... and a Plan

Even in moments of rest and vacation, I am constantly reminded of the ways that African American youth continue to wrestle with injustices – such as youth violence and racism—in addition to their ongoing development and processes of determining who they are or want to be. Often, blaringly absent from their experiences and reflections are discussions, or even evidence, of their spirituality. In particular, this summer while on vacation, I traveled through Jacksonville, FL, which is often referred to as “Murder Capital, USA” by some of its youth.⁵¹⁹ There I encountered the stories of youth who were struggling for mere survival and who were feeling overwhelmed by the senseless crime around them. I overheard stories of young Black men who were stopped and searched by police as they were walking through their own subdivisions, on the way to spend the night with friends. I observed these youth as they appeared to give up in the face of the “craziness” around them. And I was tempted to criticize the youth for not being able to persist in the face of these struggles; but, I again became aware of the ever present need for communities of faith to support youth, even when the youth do not feel as if they can do anything. This summer, almost twenty years after Parker’s initial interviews, I observed African American youth continuing to struggle and was reminded of the urgency of this research on the lives of African American youth and the communities of faith which seek to support them.

⁵¹⁹ In spite of this nickname among the youth, the national statistics for violent crime indicate that Jacksonville ranks about 19th in murders committed during 2008. The number of murders reported was 14.3 per 100,000 persons. See also http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/offenses/violent_crime/murder_homicide.html (retrieved 7/5/2010). The statistics for Jacksonville alone were not available for the number of murders among children and youth. Also in naming that Jacksonville does not have the highest murder rate in the U.S., I do not attempt to downplay the impact of any number of violent crimes on the lives of young people.

Building on Evelyn Parker's discussion of fragmented spirituality—or spirituality in which youth subconsciously or consciously relegate God to the realm of personal transformation and place societal and systemic transformation in the realm of “utopia,” as things that one can wish for but never expect to happen – in this dissertation, I attempted to explore the questions of:

1. How and why are African American Christian adolescents experiencing fragmentation in their spirituality? In what ways are youth not connecting their belief in God with a call to work for change or even a hope that change in their communities can take place? and
2. What can we do to foster an *integrated-integrating* spirituality? What type of theological claims and pedagogical frameworks are necessary to help adolescents develop a more integrated spirituality? What spiritual practices or disciplines empower youth to attend to the myriad dimensions of youth life and societal concerns?⁵²⁰

In an attempt to answer the first question, I explored fragmented spirituality among African American youth focusing on their concerns about their friends and communities; their understandings and experiences of God, religion, and the church; and their communal involvement. The youth interview and survey data confirmed that fragmented spirituality is still operative in the lives of African American youth and pointed towards the ways that fragmented spirituality, though functional, limits the prophetic potential and power of African American youth today.

Throughout this dissertation and particularly in paying attention to the voices of the young people, I note that African American youth are concerned about the world around them. When simply asked to describe their communities and schools youth offered vivid descriptions and did not shy away from discussing the problems that exist

⁵²⁰ See Introduction, pp. 4-5

around them. These young African Americans were both excited about their friendships and families, and frustrated with their schools or communities. Overall, these young people were not blind or unaffected by issues going on around them.

I started with the concerns of young people, not simply because I assumed that all youth have issues; but, I wanted to step back and not impose my list of youth concerns on them. I wanted to hear firsthand about what was significant to this group of African American youth. However, I also started with their concerns, because I wanted to pay attention to how their concerns connected (or did not connect) with their spiritual lives and their action in the world.

Looking collectively at their concerns and at their understandings of God, the youth interview and survey data demonstrated many dimensions of fragmented spirituality. The youth described positive experiences of God and confidently described God blessing them in individual and personal ways. However, their language and responses were less confident when describing God's activity in their communities, particularly in government. Many youth even stated that while God may be or might try to be in politics, politicians do not acknowledge or do not demonstrate any evidence of God's activity in the political realm.⁵²¹ Furthermore, in the narratives, youth were clear that contemporary politics does not reflect their understanding of how God should be connected with government. However, the youth had difficulty naming and outlining effective examples of God's activity in the governmental arena.

Beyond their understandings of God's activity in the world, the youth also described various experiences in communities of faith. In particular, most youth had positive experiences of their faith communities and described their churches as extended

⁵²¹ See Chapter 3, pp. 61-64

families and significant communities of support. Few of the youth also named the ways that their churches emphasized the need for action in the world around them. However, other youth found their churches to be ineffective in fully welcoming and encouraging youth, and often irrelevant to their concerns. Specifically these youth described the ways that their churches did not offer help in making sense of many issues that were taking place in their schools and communities – such as racism or violence.⁵²²

The youth also demonstrated fragmented spirituality in the ways that they understood and described their agency in their communities. Commendably the youth were very active in their communities. They volunteered their time tutoring and doing community service projects. However, similar to their lack of confidence in God's work in political arenas, youth were not equally confident in their abilities to take action on larger, societal or political issues. As noted above, the youth were often very aware of the problems in their local communities and governments, but the many issues that youth named did not connect with the work that they were currently doing in their communities. In other words, their awareness of current events and politics demonstrates the ways that youth are paying attention to their communities; however, their awareness did not translate to direct action or even awareness of the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and governments.

Additionally, the youth did not see themselves as fully capable and active agents right now. Many youth narratives were filled with statements such as “when I get older,” “when I finish college,” or “I know that one day I will do something great.” Each of these responses emphasized the hope for what youth will accomplish *later*, but did not convey a strong sense among the youth themselves about what they were currently able to

⁵²² Ibid, pp. 58-60

accomplish. Thus, I observed youth who were faithful, aware, and actively preparing for a future, but not actively working to address their real concerns in the present.

Furthermore, even when youth were clear that they felt a need or a calling to respond to concerns in their communities, there was a disconnection for many youth between their work in the community and their spirituality. While many youth resonated with the language of God calling them to respond to issues in their community – naming particular future professions that they felt drawn to because of this “calling”, other youth refuted or remained ambiguous about a direct link between their religion and their motivation to make a difference in the world. One case in particular stood out as the young woman boldly argued that her church had very little to do with her yearning to make a difference.⁵²³

To summarize, fragmented spirituality among these African American youth was evidenced in the

1. Over emphasis of the personal—in that God and religion was most often connected with their personal lives and there was a very limited view of God working in the larger society and government.
2. Lack of confidence in their ability to affect change in the present or beyond the personal.
3. Disconnection between their spirituality, their faith communities, and their communal involvement.⁵²⁴

Beyond exploring the contours of fragmentation in youth spirituality, I also explored the ways that the youth narratives reflect larger trends and sources of fragmentation and fragmented spirituality in American society and within African

⁵²³ Ibid, 69-71.

⁵²⁴This is slight nuance of the list presented in Chapter 6, which includes an evidence of fragmentation in both the youth interview data and educational resources. There I emphasize the evidence of “An emphasis of God to bless youth individually and only a nascent understanding of how God is calling youth to respond; a limited treatment of any concept of change, conversion, or transformation; and an emphasis on the personal and limited engagement with the communal and political.”

American Christianity. For example, discussions of religion and religious temperaments from the early 20th century onward include discussions of divided selves and double consciousness, indicating the presence of fragmentation in spirituality and identities within the larger context. Furthermore, contemporary understandings of the self and identity development center on concepts of multiple-selves, or multiple narratives and identities which make up a person's identity. Also from a sociological perspective, American society in modernity and post-modernity includes both an emphasis on a public and private sphere and by extension differentiated expectations of the types of actions that can take place in each sphere. Along with the trends toward privatization and role differentiation, a key component of American society is American individualism, which focuses primarily on the individual in terms of the rights of individuals and in the ways that the individual is treated as fully autonomous, and in a sense disconnected from communities and institutions. In relationship to these trends, I also explored the ways that American individualism impacts American religions and youth spirituality. In particular, looking at the work of sociologists Robert Bellah and Christian Smith, I noted the ways that contemporary youth spirituality includes trends to focus on God's personal connection to youth and to emphasize religion as being primarily concerned with making individual youth feel good. These trends thus demonstrate a larger context in which fragmentation and individualism are rampant, and in which religion is designed and expected to remain private and individualized. Religion thus is not expected to require much of its adherents.

Furthermore, religious education in general is full of often competing purposes and goals. The sample of current educational resources in African American churches

included religious language and practices that focused primarily on the personal and interpersonal. These educational resources did not greatly demonstrate communal or societal dimensions of Christianity or spirituality. The emphasis was on a less active spirituality, which focused on reflection and religious actions such as prayer and trusting God. They excluded discussions of God's work in the larger society or even the need for active engagement in communities and society as a response to experiencing the presence of God. Likewise the educational resources explored in this dissertation included complex understandings of God, but still emphasized God's work with individuals and in personal lives above other types of action.

In responding to many dimensions of fragmented spirituality I observed in the youth interview and survey data, as well as in the educational resources and larger society, I also offered alternatives to this fragmentation. I attempted to answer my second research question:

What can we do to foster an *integrated-integrating* spirituality? What type of theological claims and pedagogical frameworks are necessary to help adolescents develop a more integrated spirituality? What spiritual practices or disciplines empower youth to attend to the myriad dimensions of youth life and societal concerns?

by outlining both essential theological norms and pedagogical strategies.

While fragmentation in general is a part of the larger society and religious landscape, there are ways to address the problematic dimensions of fragmented spirituality. In particular I argue that more robust theologies, which build upon the complex heritage of African American Christianity and specifically Womanist theologies, help youth address fragmented spirituality. In order to foster a more integrated spirituality it is essential to include elements such as an

- Expanded understanding of God
- Emphasis on conversion and transformation
- Emphasis on hope
- Reorientation towards public theology via communal care and social witness

In other words, one of my initial assertions holds true; the concept of God which is operative among African American youth is not complex, nuanced, or “big” enough. Thus, in responding to the prevalence of understandings of God as primarily personal, I argue that youth need to have an understanding of God’s power to work beyond the personal. However, in responding to the ways that youth limit God or relegate God to one realm only, I argue that youth do not simply need a vision of God miraculously working in all areas. Instead youth need a more complex understanding of how God acts and how God requires youth to act in the world. Essentially, in order to help youth respond to fragmentation in their expectations of how and where God works, youth must be encouraged in the need to cooperate and participate with God.

Furthermore, my emphasis on conversion and transformation sought to directly respond to the ways that youth could feel a need for change, but never understand it in terms of their religious lives. Instead, opening up the theological category of conversion and transformation to emphasize both conversion in terms of personal spiritual journeys and salvation along with societal transformation introduces a communal and societal element into a core religious experience of African American Christianity. Thus I argued for the need to expand youth understandings of conversion to include a conversion in worldview or vision, conversion as creative transformation—or “change that transforms humanity and the wider world”⁵²⁵, and conversion to the neighbor. These three

⁵²⁵ Coleman, 93. See Chapter 5 (above) for a fuller discussion.

expansions in the theology of conversion and transformation empower youth to expand beyond the personal and to have a theological grounding for societal change.

Likewise, the emphasis on and expansion of hope connects with the youth experiences of fragmentation in their expectations of what God can do and in how change will take place. More specifically, I explored Parker's concept of emancipatory hope which includes the "expectation that dominant powers of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism will be toppled and that African American adolescents have agency in God's vision for dismantling these powers of domination."⁵²⁶ Also I introduced the concept of eschatological hope, which reminds youth that we are constantly living in the tension of pointing towards a vision of a "kingdom of God" which will only be fully realized in the future and working for change now.⁵²⁷

Finally, a reorientation towards a public theology through communal care and social witness responds to the sociological dimensions of fragmentation in terms of American individualism and the privatization of religion. This reorientation towards public theology, I argue, empowers youth to embody their spirituality in the public sphere and again explicitly attends to the communal and societal dimensions of spirituality.

In addition to emphasizing essential theological norms which foster a more integrated spirituality, I recognize that our strategies and pedagogy for developing youth spirituality must also respond to their experiences of fragmentation. For example, religious education must actively hold together the dimensions of formation and transformation in order to foster spirituality which integrates and holds these elements together. More specifically, in responding to the trends among African American youth to

⁵²⁶ Parker, viii.

⁵²⁷ Arzola, 33. See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion.

not fully connect with and live into the complex legacy of African American Christianity, I argued that youth must be invited and nurtured in this tradition. Youth must be formed in the narratives of the community and practices of worship. For example, many youth over and over emphasized experiences of God which focused solely or primarily on their personal lives. The youth often did not see God or expect God to work beyond these personal experiences. However Biblical narratives and narratives of African American history and resistance are replete with the ways that God works on behalf of individuals and entire nations of people.

Similarly, I found that even though the youth were all actively involved in the lives of their religious communities, their participation and understanding of the religious practices of their communities was also one-dimensional. Therefore, in order to foster an integrated spirituality youth have to reconnect with the practices of worship. These practices of worship are foundational in developing core spiritual disciplines, which affect their spirituality beyond the explicit or conscious knowledge. For example, even as youth are involved in their churches and youth groups, youth must continue learning and experiencing the complex ways that practices such as prayer, singing, and testifying are designed to connect youth with God and with their community. In particular, I emphasized spiritual disciplines which can be done individually, but which explicitly include communal and even societal dimensions. Thus in response to the disconnections of religious practices and communities from political and communal change, I offered strategies and reminders of the ways that prayer, historically, connected with and undergirded any work for social justice. Similarly singing and testifying pushed beyond individual foci and helped in the formation of communities of support and resistance.

Intricately connected with these formative elements of religious education, my examination of fragmented spirituality among African American youth also points to the need for youth to unambiguously experience and embrace the transformative nature of their spirituality and religious education. Similar to the need for a theology which includes conversion and transformation, a pedagogy which fosters integrated spirituality must take transformation seriously. Specifically, in response to the uncertainty about how youth can act in the world today, I began by emphasizing religious education as transformation of individuals in community. Under this rubric, I included the need to attend to and affirm the humanity and *somebodiness* of youth. In particular, affirming the *somebodiness* of African American youth helps push youth beyond the mythology that they must wait until the future to have an impact on the world. Affirming youth humanity and *somebodiness* also reminds youth of their power and responsibility to resist oppression, now. In many ways, this affirmation is the first step in responding to their fragmented spirituality as evidenced in their lack of confidence in their ability to affect change in the present or beyond the personal. It also responds to their fragmented spirituality as evidenced in the disconnection between their spirituality, their faith communities, and their communal involvement.

Next, I argued for religious education as transformation of society and institutions. Again, this primarily and intentionally challenges the understandings that religion is only personal. Thus, I included the practice of conscientization, which includes critical reflection and action. Critical reflection on society and institutions affirms that youth spirituality and God are political. Therefore, creating the means and space for youth to reflect on the societal and governmental structure empowers them to ask the

questions of where is God and where would they expect and God to be. Inviting youth to imagine God in government builds both the expectation that God should not be limited to certain realms, and raises awareness of the ways that we are all connected with God and society. This strategy also connects with our expanded understanding of God, and emphasizes that it is our cooperation with God that brings about or limits God's work in government and politics.

Conscientization also responds to the ways that youth communal involvement is often disconnected from what youth name as concerning them in the world. Moreover, I argued that not only must youth encounter language and narratives of resistance and transformation in their religious lives and education, but they must also be encouraged to take action as part of their religious lives. In this way, critical reflection and action underscores my understanding of integrated spirituality as an active spirituality. Thus, while I was excited that many youth *just felt* a need to respond to issues in the world around them, and while I do not argue that every impetus for justice and action is a specifically religious one; it is unacceptable for youth to feel that their religious lives have *nothing* to say to encourage action in the world. It is equally unacceptable for youth to feel that their religious communities hinder their desires and actions in the world around them. Thus a pedagogy of integrated spirituality must include opportunities for reflection and direct action in response to the concerns observed.

Finally, in outlining a critical pedagogy of integrated-integrating spirituality, I emphasized religious education as transformative of religious institutions and practices. Essentially, this strategy included a system of checks and balances in reminding us that even our religious practices can become oppressive and are in need of ongoing reflection

and improvement. However, beyond the need to challenge religious structures and practices, here I push youth to remain open to speak and hear prophetic words— to remain open to the ways that God is still speaking. In particular, this strategy addresses the many examples from the youth narratives where communities of faith did not (or could not) help youth respond to the many concerns they encountered. As a result, I assert that youth must hold their religious communities to a higher standard and push back against religious institutions which have become irrelevant to their concerns.

Hoping Against Hope

Throughout the dissertation research I have been shocked and amazed by the many issues named and responses given by the youth. In their narratives, I glimpsed the myriad joys and concerns that youth wrestle with on a daily basis, in their friendships and relationships, academic lives, and in their future plans. I also saw the problems they experience with gangs, violence, low expectations from teachers and peers, and even ongoing inequality in how Black youth are viewed and treated in schools. However, I also saw youth who were actively seeking God's guidance and presence in their lives and youth who were making plans for future success and yearning to respond to issues around them. Beyond helping me to further explore and research their spirituality, listening to the narratives of young people and paying attention to the very real concerns, and at times tragedies, which are parts of their daily lives serves as a clarion call for communities of faith and concerned adults to respond.

Admittedly, I remain overwhelmed by the daunting task of addressing the myriad concerns that African American youth face, and the task of helping religious

communities better equip youth to respond to these issues. I am also aware that any type of solution will seem inept and limited. Nevertheless, I am encouraged to continue the work of building the capacity of institutions and communities of faith, so that they become part of a collective network of resources that can empower youth development. In other words, in my dissertation I am not arguing that a different type of spirituality will change or ameliorate *all* youth concerns; however, I assert that spirituality should be among the resources that youth turn to in their efforts to address their concerns. Hence I am excited about the possibility of nurturing an integrated-integrating spirituality with youth – as they are empowered to hold together the seemingly disparate arenas of their lives, tap into the resources of their faith communities and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, and to see themselves as capable of affecting change on individual, communal and societal/systemic levels.

Moreover, I am excited and energized because nurturing youth in this type of spirituality and making the space for youth to be “outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* ...[and] to know more and in greater depth than is considered good...”⁵²⁸ will not only improve their way of being in the world, but will challenge us in new and exciting ways.

Returning to Kira’s interview narrative, even in the face of violence and poor publicity surrounding her school, she remains hopeful and shows us a glimpse of what hoping against hope might look like, if nurtured, in her...

Yes, [one] good thing that I like about [my highschool] it has such a bad reputation, but it’s a beautiful thing when great things come out of that. Like we have the city councilwoman that came from [my highschool]. So it’s like a beautiful thing to see, like, she came from that. That’s like hope. And ...like I was telling somebody else, if you want to be used by

⁵²⁸ From Alice Walker’s definition of womanist.

God, it's [seems] ... easier to be molded and shaped by God when you're in – ... the darkness and you're a light in darkness – ... Because then in that environment, you could be empowered, ... you can be molded and shaped because you get a chance to exercise what you believe and put your faith to work. So that's another good thing about being in an environment where people have no hope, because that gives you a chance to encourage them and stuff like that.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁹ Kira's Interview Transcript, p. 4, lines 155-166.

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Appendix A

IRB PROTOCOL SUMMARY

Research Project: Integrated-Integrating Pedagogy

Principal Investigator: Almeda M. Wright

This protocol summary gives an overview of research for my dissertation on “Integrated-Integrating Pedagogy: A Practical Theological Analysis of Fragmented Spirituality among African American Youth.” This research includes an empirical study utilizing literature, curriculum, and sermon reviews; semi-structured interviews; and curriculum testing group to gather and analyze data regarding the identity development, spirituality and civic engagement of youth, in particular African American youth.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE

Many African American youth, daily, experience racism, sexism, violence, and other affronts to their humanity, yet in responding to these experiences few if any name their spirituality and religious traditions as helping them to make sense of or work to address the prevalence of these experiences. Building upon the ground breaking research of scholar and religious educator Evelyn Parker, I explore the phenomenon of “fragmented or fractured” spirituality among African American adolescents. Fragmented or fractured spirituality is spirituality in which youth subconsciously or consciously relegate God to the realm of personal transformation and place societal change and systemic transformation in the realm of “utopia,” as things that one can wish for but never expect to happen.

Parker encountered fragmented spirituality in looking at the interview data of African American youth in the 1990s in the Chicago area. Her interviews gave examples of youth who passionately described their understandings of God working in their lives, but when she moved to conversations of their experiences of racism the youth switched to language of “wishful thinking” and did not exhibit the same confidence or even see God working in their lives regarding racism. Parker notes, “Deeply held religious beliefs and issues of race and violence are bifurcated...these teenagers express little or no expectations regarding racial injustice and no beliefs of God’s activity in ending racism” (43). Parker’s work is also somewhat startling because she is not simply articulating the occurrence of disillusionment or hopelessness in youth without a core faith or faith community. Her research points to the disconnection between beliefs about God and expectations of change in the world among some of the “most faithful” youth.

Therefore, this research is designed to explore and clarify the experience and components of fragmented spirituality among African American Christian youth and to propose ways that faith communities can help youth address this fragmentation and foster a more integrated spirituality. In this dissertation I explore fragmented spirituality among African American youth asking the following questions:

- ⌘ Why are African American Christian adolescents experiencing fragmentation in their spirituality? What is hindering them from connecting their belief in God with a call to work for change or even a hope that change in their communities can take place? And
- ⌘ What can we do to foster an integrated-integrating spirituality? What type of theological claims and pedagogical frameworks are necessary to help adolescents develop an integrated-integrating spirituality? What spiritual practices or rituals empower youth to attend to the myriad dimensions of youth life and societal ills?

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGICAL PHASES

This research over the course of 2008-2009 includes four phases:

Phase One: The first phase is a review of two categories of educational curricula used in African American churches with adolescents. In particular this phase will include a review of the *Urban Ministry, Inc.* Sunday school curricula marketed for youth and young adults. This phase will also include a review of sermons from Atlanta area churches. I will review sermons from a cross-section of African American churches – looking at different size churches and denominations. The review of this curriculum and sermons will provide background information on two types of educational content being shared with adolescents in their communities of faith.

Phase Two: The second phase is to conduct surveys and semi-structured interviews with adolescents regarding their understanding of themselves, their communities and their spirituality. The surveys and interviews will ask youth (ages 13-21) to address the ways that their spirituality connects with their understanding of self and community—in particular we will discuss how their spirituality informs, sustains or hinders the work that they do (feel capable of doing) personally and in their communities. I will also ask youth to discuss what particular resources of their faith traditions they refer to most often in their community work (if any) and what communities have nurtured or hindered their sense of spirituality. The survey was designed in conjunction with the Youth Theological Initiative to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data about youth beliefs and practices, the beliefs and practices of their family and faith communities, as well as data about the community involvement of adolescents.

Phase Three: The third phase will include analyzing the youth survey and interview data in order to: (1) name trends and themes in adolescent spirituality and (2) develop a sample curricula that can help youth address fragmentation and connect their spirituality with being involved in their communities.

Phase Four: The fourth phase will be an implementation of the sample curricula developed in phase three with a group of 8-10 Atlanta area youth. The implementation will take place over the course of 5-8 weeks, with the youth meeting with the PI once a week. Each weekly meeting will last ninety minutes, with extended sessions as needed for particular activities, as agreed upon by the group and their parents/guardians. The preliminary design will be adapted by a discernment process described by religious educator David White and will include:

1. *Listening:* One-two weeks of discussing with youth issues they are currently facing and determining one issue that they would like to address or explore further.
2. *Understanding:* The discussion of issues would be followed by one to two weeks of the youth doing research and gathering resources on the particular issue/question they've agreed upon and reporting their findings to the rest of the group for further clarification and discussion.
3. *Dreaming:* Two weeks dreaming about what changes they want to take place (even if they seem impossible at first). These weeks would also include looking at the resources of their faith and African American heritage for examples of persons who have also worked to affect changes or address issues like them. The PI would work with youth to research such figures and/or offer lessons.
4. *Acting:* The final step will include deciding a specific type of action for the youth group to take and then taking it. Over 2 to 3 weeks, the youth will meet with the PI to implement the actions they've agreed upon. Youth will also partner with community organizations and institutions to work towards making on-going connections.
5. *Reflecting/Exit Interviews:* This step includes continuing to reflect with the youth about the issues to see if further action is required. The final step will be to reflect with the youth group as a whole

and to interview youth individually about their experience with the curriculum. The exit interviews will take place no more than one week after the whole group wrap up.

EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

Methods of Church and Sermon Selection

Sermons will be selected from churches in the metro Atlanta area. The PI will obtain a list of African American churches in the area from the Candler Contextual Education Office, Baptist Studies Program, Episcopal Studies Program, and other sources. Using this list, the PI will write the pastor of each church, describing the research project and inviting the pastor to submit sermons that he or she would like to be considered. The PI will select a sample of 15 churches, meeting the overall criteria of being denominationally diverse (Baptist, United Church of Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Non-denominational), being distributed throughout the metro Atlanta area, and representing a range of membership sizes. Each church will be able to submit up to 3 sermons to be included in the analysis.

Methods of Youth Survey and Interviewee Selection

The participants will be recruited from two different contexts. First, the PI will recruit adolescents who are participating in the Youth Theological Initiative (YTI), hosted at Candler School of Theology during the month of July 2008. YTI attendees come from across the United States and represent an array of Christian denominations. A letter describing the research, as well as the informed consent form, will be included in the mailing to adolescents accepted to YTI. Interested students will be asked to review the informed consent forms with their parents or guardians and mail them back to YTI with their acceptance materials. The YTI interviewees will be interviewed on Emory's campus, during the YTI session. Also, YTI participants will complete the survey on youth spirituality during the YTI session.

Youth will also be recruited from the churches contributing sermons to be analyzed in the first phase of the research. The PI will send letters to the youth pastors of these churches and will make presentations, as invited, to the youth groups to recruit members. Interested youth will be asked to email or call the PI. When a potential participant contacts the PI expressing interest in the research, the PI will use the consent letter as a script to explain the research study. Signature on the consent/assent form will indicate the participant's willingness to be interviewed. Atlanta area youth will also be interviewed on Emory's campus or at a more agreeable Atlanta location, if parents/youth are unable to get to Emory.

For YTI, all youth who submit the appropriate, signed consent/assent form will be admitted to the study. In the other context, the first 9-10 youth who submit the appropriate, signed consent/assent form will be invited to be interviewed. The goal is to admit 18-20 African American youth (half from YTI and half from Atlanta area churches) and 18-20 youth of other races (from YTI) to the study, with as balanced a gender distribution as possible, noting the probability of more female interviewees, given the demographics of many youth groups and those attending YTI.

Method of Selecting Curriculum Testing Group

Participants in the Curriculum Testing Group will be selected from Atlanta area churches and youth organizations. The PI will send letters to the youth pastors of these churches and will make presentations, as invited, to the youth groups to recruit members. The PI will also contact Atlanta area youth who have been interviewed in the earlier phase of the research to see if they are interested in this next phase of the project. Interested youth will be asked to email or call the PI. When a potential participant contacts the PI expressing interest in the research, the PI will use the consent letter as a script to explain the research study. Signature on the consent/assent form will indicate the participant's willingness to participate in the Curriculum Testing Group and to meet weekly for 5-8 weeks. In selecting youth to participate in the group, the PI will attend to questions of diversity across denominational affiliation, gender, and age. 8-10 youth will be selected to participate in the curriculum testing group.

Data Collection

Data collection instruments include: literature, curriculum, and sermon reviews; semi-structured interviews; and curriculum testing group; and engaging in analysis, interpretation and public sharing. This research project will be based on the voices of youth and their complex relationships with religious communities and other contexts. The primary research methods are described below:

1. Review theological and social science literature on identity development, spirituality and communal engagement – looking both at trends among adolescents as well as the wider society as it concerns fragmentation in identities and the separation of religion and communal/public involvement. This review will also look at the narratives of particular African Americans who have demonstrated an integration of their spirituality and their civic engagement.
2. Review Urban Ministries, Inc Sunday school curriculum and sermons from African American churches in the Atlanta area.
3. Survey and interview youth (aged 13-21), 18-20 African American youth and 18-20 youth of other races, inviting them to share their experiences as adolescents in faith communities and how their understandings of their faith connect with other areas of their lives.
4. Engage in analysis and interpretation of the interviews, bringing the insights of youth into dialogue with earlier literature, and drawing interpretive conclusions about youth, fragmented spirituality and involvement in communities.
5. Develop a curriculum based on the analysis and interpretation of the above data with the goal of helping youth develop a more integrated spirituality
6. Test this curriculum with a group of youth in the Atlanta area.

Sermon and Curriculum Review: In reviewing the curricula and sermons, I will attend to the following questions:

11. What are the major topics or theological themes being presented?
12. What issues or practical situations are addressed? personal sin? personal issues, sicknesses, wealth, etc.? communal issues? systemic/societal issues? Are issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexism, homelessness named/explored in the sermon/curriculum?
13. Do the topics/themes presented include calls to personal piety or behavior? communal action? social justice? none? all?
14. How and where is **God** understood to act? What is God expected to do?
15. What types of **change** does the preacher/curriculum call for? Personal? Communal? Systemic? Is there a call to collective civic engagement or political action?
16. How are **humans** called to respond/act in the world? (Charity? Good works? Prosperity? Advocacy? Justice-building?)
17. How are **adolescents** referred to in the sermons or curriculum? (Are they referenced or included? If so, how?)
18. Is there any reference to race/ethnicity in the sermon/curriculum? If so, how?
19. How are **African American** people discussed and described?
20. What **hopes** are named for the African American community? For the world?
21. In light of the above analysis, what conclusions might be drawn about what is being taught explicitly, implicitly, or by being ignored?

These questions will serve as the basis of my aggregate analysis—naming patterns within the curriculum and sermons. This will help to answer my underlying questions: Is this curriculum or content indicative of a fragmented spirituality? Is one dimension of spirituality given primacy over others?

Semi-structured Interviews with Youth. Researchers will ask youth to tell their stories, including their significant experiences, significant communities and influences, worries, dreams and visions. Questions will include:

- Describe a typical day in your life. What things do you do? What people do you see or hang out with? What places do you go to? What questions or things do you think or worry about?

- What are some things that you or other youth talk or worry about? (Has this changed over time, as you've grown up?)
- What are some of the resources (beliefs, people, practices) you turn to help with these struggles?
- Do you feel that your family, friends, society, community and church all have the same expectations for your life? Explain
- Tell me about your concerns about your local community, world, etc. What things do you want to see changed? What types of things are you doing in your community, government, world? What would you like to do? See done?
- Where/how do you experience God working in your life? Community, government?
- What are the reasons for working for change? Do you have a sense of God/church/family/friends/school/etc. calling you to work for change?
- What are your goals/dreams in life? How do you plan to achieve them?
- What would you say is the most important for others to understand about your faith (Christianity)? What has been the most important for you? How do you feel about your faith, spirituality, religion, church? When/how did you get involved?
- How important is race to your self understanding/identity? Tell me a story about why or how race is important or has shaped your life so far? OR How important is your ethnicity (Euro-American, African, Irish, etc.) to your sense of self? In what ways does this enter your daily life? Do you think about your ethnic background on a regular basis? When does it come up most, if ever?

Transcripts of semi-structured interviews will be analyzed using these four steps: naming (1) recurring words and phrases, symbols, actions, and interactions; (2) common themes and patterns that emerged; (3) comparisons between the themes and patterns of different age groups and youth in different communities; and (4) interpretation of results.

Informed Consent

All surveys, interviews and curriculum testing groups will be conducted with permission from the participants. Consent letters will be used to attain informed consent, preceded when possible by a conversation (using the letter as a script), from participants who are age 18 and older and from a parent/legal guardian of participants who are age 17 and younger. Participants who are age 17 and younger will be asked to sign an age-appropriate assent form.

Participant Input

When the PI has prepared an oral or written presentation based on this research, a copy of the presentation will be sent to the participants. Direct quotations from the participant will be highlighted so that the participant may check this quotation for accuracy. In addition, parts of the PI's analysis relating to the participant's part in the research will be highlighted, and participants will be asked to give feedback on this analysis. This feedback will then be incorporated into final versions of public presentations.

Voluntary Participation

Participants in the interviews and curriculum testing groups will be asked to assent or consent freely to participating and will be told that a parent/legal guardian cannot force them to participate. They will be told that they may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without risk of harm to themselves. Further, they will be told that they may skip any question in the interviews or remove themselves from the interviews. Participants may skip any question asked during the curriculum testing groups or remove themselves from the sessions; and that they may skip any question or remove themselves from the exit interview.

While there are no foreseeable risks involved in the research, the interviews include youth telling stories from their experiences and this may be stressful to them. At the end of the research, the PI will make counseling resources available for the Atlanta area youth and will work with youth from other

regions of the country, as needed, to find counseling resources in their areas. For Atlanta area youth, the PI will refer youth, as needed, to the Care and Counseling Center of Georgia (www.cccgeorgia.org).

Confidentiality Precautions

Audio-recordings of the curriculum testing group sessions will only be available to the PI. Audio-recordings of the semi-structured interviews and individual exit interviews will only be available to the PI and the interviewee, upon request.

For public presentations, direct quotations will be extracted from the individual interviews, the curriculum testing sessions, and the individual exit interviews. Pseudonyms will be used for all direct quotations, and any identifying information will be changed to protect the identities of the participants.

Data Management

All interview and curriculum testing group sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The audio files and transcriptions will be stored on a password protected computer server. The PI will also create a system of identification coding. All transcripts will be stored under the identification code and not the participants' names. The transcripts will be edited to remove all names and identifying information. The PI will be the only one with access to the identification codes linking actual participant information with interview transcriptions. The list of codes will also be stored in a separate password protected computer server.

The audio-recordings will be stored for a period of five years after the completion of the research, and will then be deleted from the secure server. All other study related data, including electronic copies of the transcripts from the interviews and groups will be maintained for possible long term study and research with the Youth Theological Initiative.

Plan for dissemination: Findings will be shared in two ways:

- Presentation of research to other students and faculty who are involved in the Initiative for Religious Practices and Practical Theology.
- Writing:
 - Two papers for presentation at the American Academy of Religion, one describing the fragmented spirituality in African American youth and another describing ways of connecting youth spirituality and civic engagement.
 - One paper for publication in a practical theology journal on youth and spirituality.
 - Dissertation

Bibliography:

Parker, Evelyn. *Trouble Don't Lasts Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003.

White, David. *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005.

Appendix B

Dissertation Interview Questions

Part I Exploring Daily Activities and General Aspects of Scholar's Life [20-30 minutes]

1. Tell me a little bit about **a typical day** in your life.
 - a. What types of things do you do?
 - i. Do you have particular hobbies or passions that you do (or like to do) daily?
 - b. What people do you see or hang out with?
 - c. What places do you go to?
 - i. Do you have to go to school? To work? Do you stay home often, go to friend's houses, church, the mall, etc.
 - d. Are there questions or things that you typically think or worry about?
2. Tell me a little bit about **the place you grew up**.
 - a. What made it unique?
 - b. What would you want to tell someone about it who had never been there before?
 - c. Can you think of one event or experience that represents what you think of when you think about where you grew up?
 - d. Who makes up the majority where you grew up? The minority?
3. Tell me a little bit about where you go to **school**.
 - a. How large is it?
 - b. Describe a typical day at your school. What are some of the events that make up this typical day?
 - c. What do you like best/least about your school?
 - d. Who makes up the majority at your school? The minority?
4. Tell me a little bit about your **primary group of friends**.
 - a. Who is part of the group?
 - b. Where do you know them from?
 - c. Have you kept in touch with them since coming to YTI? How have you done so (cell phone, IM, facebook, e-mail, etc.)?
 - d. What similarities do you share? What makes you different from each other?
 - e. What hot topics or political issues does your group of friends agree about? What hot topics or political issues do you disagree about?
5. Tell me a little bit about your **family**.
 - a. Who do you live with?
 - b. What are some things you like to do with your family?
 - c. Tell me about a time when you were proud to be a part of your family.
 - d. Are there religious practices that are a part of your family life? (e.g. prayer before meals, devotions, etc.)
 - e. What values do you think your parent/s most want to pass on to you?

- f. If I were interviewing your parents today instead of you, what would they say they most want for you or is their greatest hope for you? What would they say is the worst thing that could happen to you?
6. Are you a part of a religious tradition or faith community? Let's talk about **your faith community**. Can you describe it for me?
 - a. Is the faith community you are a part of now the same one that you grew up in? When/how did you get involved in this community?
 - b. Tell me about a time when you felt passionate about being involved in your faith community or a time when you had a particularly powerful experience in your faith community.
 - c. How would you summarize what happens at your church for someone who's never been to your church?
 - d. What would your church say is the message of Christ?
 - e. What would you say is the most important for others to understand about your faith? What has been the most important for you?
 - f. How does your church understand "God's work" in the world?
 - g. And how is God calling your church to be a part of that work in the world?
 - h. Can you think of a way your faith community has helped you to become who you are today?
 - i. Are there things that your faith community would not want you to do or people they would not want you to associate with?

Part II: Exploring Youth Concerns, Struggles and Actions in the World

1. Tell me about some of **the concerns and struggles, both personal and social**, that you or other youth face?
 - a. What are some things that you or other youth talk or worry about?
 - b. When you look around your **school and community**, what kinds of concerns do you have?
 - i. What things do you want to see changed?
 - c. Similarly, as you look in the **larger society** – are there things in the news about other parts of the country or world that concern you?
 - i. What things do you want to see changed?
 - d. Can you describe how you respond when you encounter these particular struggles?
 - e. What are some of the resources (beliefs, people, practices) you turn to help with these struggles?
 - f. What types of things are you doing in your community, government, world?
 - i. What would you like to do? See done?
2. Do you feel a particular need or "calling" to respond to some of the crisis and social concerns you see in the lives of teenagers or in the world?
 - a. If so, what are the reasons for working for change?
 - b. Do you have a sense of God/church/family/friends/school/etc. calling you to work for change?

- c. Have you ever learned about a problem in the world that has motivated you to change something about how you live, or to encourage other people to change something about how they live? Tell me about the problem and what changes you made.
3. How does your church, faith, or understanding of God help you to think about or make sense of the struggles that you or other youth have? To make sense of the concerns you have for the world?
 - a. Are there particular practices (eg. prayer, meditation, bible reading, etc.) that help you in making sense of troubling situations in the world?
 - b. Do you have specific people that you take your questions and struggles to? (Can you talk to a leader in your church, a friend, etc.?)
 - c. How have you come to find these people and/or practices? Was it a process of trial and error? Was there something particular about these practices/people that clued you into the fact that they would be good in times of questioning, fear or struggles?
4. Where/how do you experience God working in your life? Community, government?
 - a. Do you think of God as working or acting in your life or the lives of other people?
 - b. Do you think of God as being involved in your community? In politics? In Government? If so, how?
5. Also, what would you say is your church's perspective and response to issues of race, poverty, gender, and class?
 - a. Tell me about what your church teaches about these issues?
 - b. For many discussions of race, class, poverty, gender and sexuality, etc. can be difficult...
 - i. What is your response to discussions about racisms, classism, etc.?
 - ii. Do you still see/experience such issues?
 - c. How important is race to your self understanding/identity?
 - i. Can you give me an example of why or how race is/is not important or has shaped your life so far? OR How important is your ethnicity (Euro-American, African, Irish, etc.) to your sense of self?
 - d. In what ways do the categories of race, class, gender, etc. enter your daily life?
 - e. Do you think about your race, ethnic background, class, gender on a regular basis?
 - i. When does it come up most, if ever?
 - f. Can you reflect on how you think God is calling you to respond to these issues? Does God have anything to say?
 - g. Do you see racism, poverty, sexism ending in the near future? Why or why not? How?
6. Can you describe someone you admire for how they **make a difference** in the world?
 - a. What made this person stand out for you?
 - b. Are there other people that you know personally who are making a difference in your community?
 - i. What types of work are they doing?
 - ii. How are they making a difference?

- c. Have you seen a clergy person or member of your congregation involved in the community (making a difference in your community). Describe when/how.
7. Similarly, can you give some examples of **the ways young people make a difference** in your community?
- a. What types of activities are you currently involved in and how are these activities making a difference in your community? Government? world?
 - b. What types of things are youth in your school or community currently doing?
 - c. What types of things can young people do?
 - d. What would you like to do? See done?
 - e. Give an example of how this activity impacts your community and youth?
 - f. Are there barriers that limit the ways young people can make a difference in your community? Explain.
 - g. Who/What in your community is supportive of young people and their efforts to make a difference?

Part III: Exploring Youth Hopes and Dreams for their future and world

Summative Comment: From talking to you, it sounds like... (interviewer's chance to make a summative comment about what youth has been saying about concerning life experiences and challenges the youth has named and to name themes from the interview so far)

1. As you think about yourself finishing high school and moving onto what is next, what are your goals/dreams in life? How do you plan to achieve them?
2. What are your dreams for your community and world? How do you plan to help them happen?
3. When you think of your life five or ten years from now, what place will some of the experiences you have told me about have in your life? What place will faith/religion/church have in your life?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you wish I had asked about that I did not ask about?
2. Is there anything else you wish to add to our conversation or anything you said earlier that you would like to go back to?
3. Thank the scholar for taking part in the interview and sharing his or her stories with you.
4. After turning off the audio recorder, ask the scholar one last time if it is ok to use the interview in the research. If the scholar says no, erase the interview while the scholar watches.

Optional Question:

1. Do you see or hear about the legacy of the Black Church in fighting against injustices in the Civil Rights Era?
 - a. Do you still see this as the church's role or responsibility?
 - b. Do you think the work of the Church in the Civil Right's era was useful? Do you think things changed? What other changes still need to take place?
 - c. How do you think God is calling the church to respond today?
 - d. What do you envision for your community, world, church? (Do you think it can ever happen, if so how?)

Appendix C

SCHOLAR SURVEY • Summer 2008

Youth Theological Initiative

Candler School of Theology

Emory University

Welcome to the Scholar Survey! Please take time and effort to express your thoughts and feelings about the following questions. Please read the questions carefully and fill out the answers completely. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We are interested to understand what your experiences have been in your faith community and in your family. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. If you have any questions while you take the survey, please ask the researcher.

Thank you for giving your time and attention to this survey! If you need more room for any answer, please continue on the back side of the sheet.

PART I: INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF

1. Gender: ___ Male ___ Female

2. Age _____

3. Race/ethnicity _____

4. Region of the country with which you identify or in which you have spent most of your life
 - ___ a. southwest
 - ___ b. northwest
 - ___ c. midwest
 - ___ d. northeast
 - ___ e. southeast

5. State in which you now live _____

6. Please list the people you live with (ex. Mom, Grandparents, 1 sister, cousin, and include pets if you want).

7. Religious Denomination or affiliation _____

8. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = not involved and 5 = very involved,
 - a. How involved were you in a faith community growing up? _____
 - b. How involved are you in a faith community now? _____

9. Please explain your answer to #8 a and b. (For example, “I was not very involved in a faith community growing up because I only went to worship once a month with my family. Now I am very involved because I go to worship, Bible study, and youth choir each week.”)

10. Please briefly describe each group below. Think about what you would want someone who knows nothing about this group to know about it. Also include information about the dilemmas or concerns you encounter in each group, if any. This can include any type of concern you wish (personal, social, political, etc.).

a. your hometown

Concerns or dilemmas in your hometown

b. your school

Concerns or dilemmas in your school

c. your main group of friends

Concerns or dilemmas of your main group of friends.

11. Have you ever learned about a problem in the world that has motivated you to change something about how you live, or to encourage other people to change something about how they live? ---- yes ---- no

If yes, briefly describe the problem and what changes you made.

12. Please, describe someone you admire for how they make a difference in the world.

13. Please, describe someone you know personally who is making a difference in your community.

14. Have you seen a clergy person or member of your congregation making a difference in your community? Please describe when/how.

15. Give some examples of the ways young people make a difference in your community.

16. Are there barriers that limit the ways young people can make a difference in your community? Explain.

17. Who/What in your community is supportive of young people and their efforts to make a difference?

18. Please check the types of activities you are currently involved in your community? Please check all that apply and feel free to write activities not listed in the space below.

- Volunteering at a Nursing Home or Hospital
- Volunteering at a Homeless shelter or soup kitchen
- Delivering meals to homebound persons (“Meals on Wheels”)
- Volunteering in a community center
- Trash Pick up (Cleaning up parks, playgrounds, streets, highways, etc)
- Rebuilding Houses (Habitat for Humanity, Christmas in July, etc.)
- Recycling
- Organizing recycling at home, school, church, etc.
- Educating peers and/or adults on environmental concerns
- Member of an environmental community organization
- Community Gardening
- Writing letters or making calls to elected officials and politicians regarding a community concern
- Participating in a mock government (mock general assembly, mock senate, etc.)
- Signing a petition or letter addressing a community concern
- Registering voters
- Tutoring
- Mentoring
- Coaching community sports teams
- Teaching adult literacy, ESL, or G.E.D. classes
- Peer educator about sexual health and relationships (unprotected sex, HIV/AIDS, STIs, relationship abuse, etc.)
- Peer educator about community violence and conflict resolution
- Protesting or picketing _____
- OTHER _____

PART II: FAITH, COMMUNITY, YOUR FAMILY, AND YOU

This section seeks to illuminate the contexts in which your faith and view of the world were originally formed. In answering the following questions, try to recall your view of the world in its early and formative stages. In the questions that ask about your faith community, think about the faith community (church, synagogue, etc.) in which you grew up or which most influenced your early view of the world.

19. What was the approximate racial/ethnic makeup of the faith community or church in which you grew up? (Please use percentages.)

20. My faith community thought faith was important for people's lives because...

21. Please place an "X" next to all that apply.

- a. My faith community seemed to stress that people were evil, bad, or deeply flawed.
- b. My faith community seemed to stress that people were mostly good and trustworthy.
- c. My faith community seemed to stress that people are a mixture of good and evil and need to be reflective about how we participate in both good and evil.
- d. My faith community seemed to stress the need for God to escape the evil of this life.
- e. My faith community seemed to stress the need to acknowledge how God is working in hidden and subtle ways through ordinary people and creation.
- f. My faith community seemed to stress this about human beings:

22. Please describe a time when you felt the presence of God in your life.

23. What theological perspectives or alternative faith practices did your faith community warn you against? Please explain the rationale they gave for this.

24. Judging not merely from what was said by leaders in the faith community, but also from what you observed from the lives of members of the community, guess the most important values of your religious community. Mark an "X" next to only five.

- a. To be a respectable member of the middle class
- b. To work hard and stay out of trouble
- c. To send their children to college
- d. To own the right homes, cars, clothes, etc.
- e. To be reflective about how our lifestyles might participate in systems of injustice
- f. To be patriotic
- g. To love Jesus
- h. To love others, even those unlike ourselves
- i. To worship every Sunday and to tithe
- j. To work as a movement toward creating a society of peace, equality and justice
- k. To care for each other as family
- l. To work to end injustices in the world such as poverty and racism
- m. To _____

25. Please place an "X" next to all that apply.

- a. My pastor and faith community rarely discuss the responsibility of religious communities to the poor.
- b. My pastor and faith community sometimes talk about the responsibility of religious communities to the poor, but it is most often framed as a condition of people far away and in another country.
- c. My pastor and faith community sometimes talk about the responsibility of religious communities to the poor, and our faith community sometimes sends work teams to offer charity to those in need.
- d. My pastor and faith community feel so strongly about the responsibility of religious communities to the poor that not only do we send work teams but we also regularly discuss legislation that impacts the poor and collaborates about how to act on their behalf.
- e. My pastor and faith community feel so strongly about the responsibility of religious communities to the poor that we have made efforts to invite the poor into our worship and our homes.

26. Are issues that have to do with class, poverty, or socioeconomic status discussed in your faith community? If yes, what actions have been taken in light of these discussions?

27. Please place an "X" next to all that apply.

- a. My faith community took consistent and concrete steps to create more racial/ethnic justice and harmony.
- b. My faith community sought ways to put our members into relationships with those of other races or ethnicities.
- c. My faith community, through sermons and lessons, often affirmed the importance of viewing all races and ethnicities as equally part of God's family.
- d. My faith community seemed altogether to ignore issues of racial and ethnic prejudice or justice.
- e. My faith community seems to view racial matters as important, but only has a limited perspective that does not take into account the many subtle ways people are ignored or oppressed.

Please rate the following statements.

28. My faith community seems generally open and affirming of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons.

1	2	3	4	5
very true	somewhat true	neutral	somewhat false	false

29. I know of at least one openly gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered person in my congregation.

1	2	3	4	5
very true	somewhat true	neutral	somewhat false	false

30. The preacher and teachers of my faith community often speak of the importance of openness to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people in biblical or theological terms.

1	2	3	4	5
very true	somewhat true	neutral	somewhat false	false

31. My faith community generally avoids the subject of alternate sexual orientation altogether.

1	2	3	4	5
very true	somewhat true	neutral	somewhat false	false

32. My faith community is openly hostile to gays, lesbians, bi-sexual or transgendered persons.

1	2	3	4	5
very true	somewhat true	neutral	somewhat false	false

33. Complete the following sentences:

- “My family taught me how to be a good _____.”
- “My family taught me to be suspicious of _____.”
- “In my family, it would have been weird to talk openly about _____.”
- “My family warned me against these theological perspectives or alternative faith practices: _____.”

34. Please name the religious practices, if any, that your family does at home.

35. If you had to name the three things your family valued most, what would they be?

PART III: CHALLENGES TO FAITH COMMUNITY AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

This section is an attempt to illuminate the experiences that may have challenged the conventional perspectives formed in your faith community and family. We understand that adolescence represents a time of life in which one's views of the world are challenged and expanded considerably, through new experiences and insights.

36. Place an "X" on the line next to the statement that best describes you.

___ a. My view of the world, God, and my place in the world has changed significantly in the past 2 years.

___ b. My view of the world, God, and my place in the world has remained much the same as it was a couple of years ago.

___ c. My view of the world, God, and my place in the world has not fundamentally changed, but I have many more questions about it than I did a couple of years ago.

___ d. I have so many new questions and problems that have become real for me in the last 2 years that I am not sure if my view of the world has changed or not.

Please explain your choice the statement in question 36. For example, why did you state that your view of God changed or remained the same?

37. Currently, what is your most burning question that leaves you unsettled about how you view the world, God, or your place in the world?

38. When it comes to making sense of your burning questions and life experiences, what activities, people, and resources are most helpful or supportive (e.g. prayer, friends, books, etc.)? Please explain.

39. What issues are you hearing about in the news that have to do with questions of community and diversity? How are these issues talked about and/or dealt with?

NOTE: Please note that the following data charts include the survey responses exactly as typed into the Survey Monkey form. The data has not been edited or reformatted, in an effort to fully reflect the thoughts of the students.

Survey Respondents Demographics					
Gender		Age	Race/Ethnicity	State in which you now live	Religious Denomination or Affiliation
Male	Female				
	Female	17	African American	Florida	Pencostal
	Female	17	AFRICAN-AMERICAN	FLORIDA	PENTECOSTAL
	Female	16	African American and Hispanic	New Jersey	Methodist
	Female	17	African	Georgia	Catholic
	Female	17	African American	Florida	christian
Male		17	african american	N.y.	christian/Baptist
Male		17	African American	Maryland	Christianity
	Female	16	African American	Georgia	Methodist
Male		17	afro american/black	florida	apostolic
	Female	16	African American and Cuban	California	non denominational
	Female	17	African-American	California	Presbyterian
	Female	16	black/ african american	georgia	Roman Catholic
Male		17	Black	Florida	Christianity

How involved were you in a faith community growing up?	How involved are you in a faith community now?	Please explain your answer to #9
Regularly Involved	Very Involved	i was regularly involved in a faith community growing up because i was young at the time and i was just learning and understanding my faith. now i am very involved because i go to church every Sunday and i go to bible study,i am also very actives in my church i am in the youth choir, the usher broad and i am the sectary in the youth ministry.
Occasionally involved	Very Involved	I was occasionally involved in a faith community because my Grandfather was a pastor. In which he forced me and my siblings to church with him. Now I have gained a personal relationship with God which influence and encourage me to be more involved.
Very Involved	Very Involved	My Mother began pastoring when I was born, so therefore i grew up in the church and over the years I have experienced God for myself thus building a love for him and desire to be active in the ministry.
Regularly Involved	Occasionally involved	I was involved as a child because for the most part i was forced. The whole religion aspect was forced upon me as a child and it sort of to lead or guide maybe even show and exemplify the way in which i should carry myself and what i should believe in as i grow up. Now, due to the forcefulness of my parents I've realized I'm all for the lord and i believe that theres a higher "energy" or spirit and fully accept and show that in my everyday living, but i choose not to practice or show that by attending church. i worship by praying and giving thanks every night.
Very Involved	Occasionally involved	I was very involved when I was younger because I lived in a two parent house hold. My mom is now a single mother and is rarely available to take us to extra- curricular activities, even though my sister and I really want to attend church events.
Very Involved	Occasionally involved	When I was younger I was very involved with church because I lived with my grandmother who was very religious. Now I am not as involved because my grandmother past away and I reside with my sister who doesn't attend church a lot.

Regularly Involved	Regularly Involved	I was always involved in church functions but I was also involved in many other things which took up most of my time.
Regularly Involved	Occasionally involved	I was regularly involved in my church when I was younger. Now I attend on an occasion.
Occasionally involved	Regularly Involved	I was occasionally involved in a faith community growing up because I was younger and they usually wanted older children to be involved but now I am regularly involved in a faith community because I am older and have proven my maturity.
Occasionally involved	Regularly Involved	growing up i only went to church on holidays such as Christmas and thanksgiving now try to go to church every Sunday that i can
Regularly Involved	Regularly Involved	When I was young I always had a church family, always attended sunday school, and was in a bible study fellowship, youth choir, youth group every friday, and did solo performances for special occasions in the music ministry. Now I moved to a new city and go to a new church that is absolutely humongous and I don't know people there and I'm not so involved but I attend my Grandparents' baptist church every 3rd sunday to help on their youth usher board and help out sometimes in evening services or special programs so I'm still regularly involved in church stuff just not at church.
Very Involved	Very Involved	I was in AGAPE growing up which is like a youth bible study on Wednesdays for k-5th, and then when i got too old i taught bible study to the younger kids and helped with AGAPE preparations.
Occasionally involved	Occasionally involved	I cannot say that i'm very involved in my faith community because I only go to church twice once or occasionally thrice a month. When I was growing up it was only once or twice a month. It could be said that i'm involved more now than i was back then but in general i'm not involved.
Regularly Involved	Regularly Involved	I grew up in a very involved faith community environment and till this day i am still involved within that faith community.

Briefly describe your hometown.
my hometown is ghetto because it got a whole lot of dilemmas we have drugs dealers, homeless, murders, and a lot more and we also have a race problem.
Jacksonville Florida is mostly described as a swampy and country place with numerous social and political issues. With a church on every corner, we still wrestle with racism, sexism, and crime in every situation.
There is literally a church on every counter in Jacksonville, Fl . However because of our failure to fully unite and expand our Spiritual movement, there has been sadly a lot of violence and crime. I have heard many say that there seems to be some type of "hold back" in Jacksonville for growing ministries. This may be due to the idea of success being 100,000,000,000 and something members. When really success is spiritual promotion and empowerment from God.
my hometown was the first town to choose diversity in their schools. my town didn't need to be told that blacks needed to attend the schooling district just because it was the "right thing to do" or it was fair. now, my hometown consist of predominately Jews. our public school systems are experiencing "white flight" where most of the whites are leaving the schools because they feel the need to not learn with minorities.
My hometown is small. Katrina really affected it, thus it has grown. The African American population is now the majority, but many of them are into the hip-hop/gang scene
In my hometown there a lot of public issues. Like there are a lot of sexual transmitted diseases and there are a lot of homicides.
Their are many concerns in buffalo such as gang violence and drugs.
My hometown is surrounded by everything. Anything you would want to do is accessible. Concerns in my hometown are the violence and its economic standpoint. Its becoming overcrowded and troublesome to travel around.
My community is a quiet middle class suburban area. It has Southern hospitality but doesn't take it as far as small towns that would considered noisy. I would say that there isn't as strong feeling of community as there could be.
My home town is somewhat violent a lot killing, yet there's a lot of diversity
My hometown is kind of crazy and has this larger than life attitude. People there get really into hip hop and everybody knows bay area rappers everywhere we go. It is pretty unique but kind of a problem because a "gangsta" mentality develops and makes things dangerous for a lot of the youth that5 take the things they hear in the music way too far.
I live in Los Angeles and I love it. For the most part people are nice and the only serious problem that I can think of is gang violence.
I live in a small city called Moultrie which contains about 20,000-30,000 people. The main concern to me in my community is how many people there are not quite open to newcomers, especially hispanic/mexican immigrants.
There is a lot of violence going on around my hometown an i would like to see all of that stopped. To see every fighting the problems within the community instead of fighting each other!

Briefly describe your school.
i love my school because it a Christian school and the teachers there are just wonderful there are no dilemmas or concerns
My high school is predominantly black. Despite our income, we are highly intelligent and very talented. We are often categorized and misjudged as people who are not capable, but what hurts is that some believe it and began to receive that character and mentally.
I attend a public school that the School Board has labeled a failing school. There are alot of students there, that i feel has lost hope for themselves due to thier environment and reputation. Yet in the mist of this i feel that there are some students attending my school who has great potential to be community leaders and world changers.
my school for the most part is extremely diverse. we're in the top 5% of Newsweek's best schools and we show great pride in that. our school recently experienced a 2 year in a row winner of the best teacher award, he turned himself in and he was charged for rape for he had a brief relationship with a former student who was 13 and they had sex in several areas of the school and opted that he get her a web camera so she could masturbate when he wasn't with her. a similar incident occurred with my high school principle for my freshman year, he was accused of raping a boy in our school.
My school is a new school and grew after hurricane Katrina. Again many of the kids are into the gang scene.
My school is not known as one of the best schools where I am from. It is quite one of the worst, the county grade of my school is a "d". There are also a lot of STD's and violence in my school.
My school is fun and full of many teachers that care about your education but there are fights on the regular.
My school is a Catholic School in the Archdiocese and has a very good reputation in the area. My school includes lots of drama but is a very good academic and family oriented community.
My school is a very diverse public school that went from 80% white-35% black-5% mixed to 51% black-27% white-22% Latinos, Indians and Mixed. At this stage is has the predominantly minority population but does really have the serious problems that are associated with that.
my is full of wanna be's and homosexuals and drama kings/queens
My school is catholic, private, and we wear uniforms. People who don't want their kids in the "bad" public schools spend 900 dollars a month to send their kids here. It is predominantly asian, then white and has a sprinkling of hispanic and black students. Our biggest problems is the breakdown by race and how all the blacks hang out, the asian cliques, and the valley girl jock boy white people. Also, the blacks and hispanic are very underrepresented in the honors and a.p. courses.
My school is one of the most diverse public high schools and it is a very good school to attend. Some problems we have had in the past are related to the tension between Blacks and Mexicans, but for the most part we all get along.
My school is a very large school and quite diverse with about 2,900 students. the typical concern at my school is the number of cliches there(quite typical of any high school) but most of them are attributed to a particular race, not so much an interest group, which causes the quite racial tensions that we might have with each other.
I would like my school to be more diverse. Everyday the school is always divided into the blacks or the whites or the Bosnians. My wish would that to be gone and for everyone to act as one. Like YTI!

Briefly describe your primary group of friends.
i love my friends a lot because i hang around positive people, my friends are always there when i need them. we hang around each other all the time, we don't nothing come in between us, if we got a problem with each other we can solve it by talking to each other about it.
I am very selective of friends. So, my group of Friends are those who have a personal relationship with God and have a similar mindset as myself.
I have both friends and associates, however it seems since i gave my life " fully" to the lord that he is teaching me how to soley depend on him and confide in him. I had about three close friends in Middle school.. one my best friend .. now I really cant say i have a best, best friend that i really feel connected to. Most of my close friends are also my church family
my friends by far are amazingly awesome. my best friends are one of them is white two are African second generation from Ghana and another is Hatian. i totally believe in diversity. we rarely have dilemmas if so its he-said-she-said nonsense.
Through my friends I have grown a lot in Christ. I have no concerns.
Even though I know a lot of people at school I don't call all of them friends. I have about three good friends at my school who I know I can trust because there are people in my school who just want to bring others down and that is not what I want in my life.
My primary group of friends are cool and down to earth type but slack a little in their work.
My primary group of friends would be the football guys since I am on the team. But my friends vary from all different typed of groups of people.
My group of friends is very small and we are considered different from mainstream. Our best characteristic is our weird and quirky personalities that bring a very vibrant aspect to our group.
wild like likes to have fun in a safe manor and some drug users and dealers and homosexuals
My primary group of friends comes from my old public middle school because I really miss public school and a lot of the rich private school kids are weird and fake so I keep the friends I know have got my back. My other best friends are usually athletes because I meet a lot of people through sporting events. I try to keep my group really really diverse though because everyone the same is really boring.
My primary group of friends is awesome. We don't really have any problems except for the normal ones like getting on each others nerves every now and then.
I hang around with an intelligent group of friends and we rarely ever fight(both vocally or phsically), but there are things that me and my friends definitely disagree on politically and socially.
My friends and i all have a lot in common, but the ones that stand out the most is our religion and our goal to one day conquer our dreams.

Have you ever learned about a problem in the world that has motivated you to change something about how you live, or to encourage other people to change something about how they live?	
Response	If yes, briefly describe the problem and what changes you made.
Yes	n/a
Yes	Well, when I received salvation and discovered the right way of living it encouraged me to change and to inform others.
Yes	Over the years i have witness people with great gifts and talents given by God, hold themselves back in life due to lack of confidence , wrong choices, and laziness. Everyday i try to glorify God with my gifts : whether its singing to him, writing a song or just reading the word and applying the revelation that God allowed me to receive to my life. i try to encorage others to use what God gave them, it is apart of who they are.. its apart of thier purpose.
Yes	I'm totally against sex trafficking in other countries, and because i won a contest for Nike and i want to become a sneaker designer I've came up with a practical way to help those in need while still fulfilling myself and doing what i love. i hope to create a sneaker that links and has to do with sex trafficking and when sold all the proceedings go to helping buy back little girls lives.
Yes	
No	
No	
No	
Yes	I have started recycling, I donate money whenever I can to various groups that help suffering people in third world countries and to organizations that fund research to cure not so publicized illness.
No	
Yes	Cruelty to animals in farms that give meat produce made me go veagan for a while last year and I still cut way back on red meat and chicken.
Yes	The problems in Darfur makes me want to help raise money and the AIDS epidemic makes me want to raise money for the cure and participate in the AIDS walk every year.
No	

Please, describe someone you admire for how they make a difference in the world.
the persons that i admire are my teacher at school and in my after school program.
My pastor is someone who I admire because she is so compassionate and desires to see people progress in life.
Someone i admire is my Uncle Joe who is also my Youth Pastor. He is passionate about everything concerning the work of God.
M.I.A. is someone i profoundly admire. she's probably the sickest musician I've ever listened to. she discusses problems in Sri Lanka and African by referring them as "worldtown." she made 50,000 for a show kept 5,000 of it and the rest she built schools in Africa. shes totally making a difference and its becoming an epidemic. she samples beats from other 3rd world countries and slowly people are catching on to that and copying her every move.
Mother Theresa. She restored and brought faith to many poverty stricken regions.
I admire Oprah Winfrey for making a difference in this world. She has done so much for some people who really needed help in certain times in their lives.
I admire my big cousin Julius "Chosen" Spencer because he chooses to sing and rap the gospel to people of all ages when he could be out there doing drugs or selling them.
Someone i admire is my father. He is a lawyer and helps people everyday with their problems. He tries to reach out to many clients and help them to the best of his ability. He also does charity work, as well as community service in our community.
I admire Don Cheadle because he uses his fame and wealth to help others and sets a good example as a role model.
Barrack Obama for trying to be the first black president and doing it positively
Kiri Davis did a documentary that won a lot of awards that drew attention to the matter that underrepresentation of minorities in the media affects the self esteem of minority children.
I admire my mother because she works too hard in everything she does and she always tries to do the right thing and she also helped put together a fund raiser for the people of Darfur and it was very successful.
My dad is the only person i admire in this world! An due to the fact that he is the man that he is there are less bums in the streets, there is less violence within my community, and he has made a difference in my world for the sacrifices he has made for me.

Give some examples of the ways young people make a difference in your community.
Open-Ended Response
we can do volunteer's work, help find a home for the homeless, and jobs for the poor.
The young people at my church witness on Saturdays and in every service. We also provide a living example of a Christian.
The youth uses creative dances and plays as a vehicle to reach out to other young people and adults in my community. There is an apartment complex right across the street from my church and our Youth Pastor takes us there to witness about once or twice a month.
simple. community service.
Food drives, encouraging small groups (bible study) and being positive people.
Some young people clean the community.
Ways in which young people in my community help out are they get jobs and do community service.
Volunteering time with anyone who needs it.
Volunteer work with the red cross. Homeless shelter volunteering. Fighting Back Youth Partnership does work with preventing alcohol and drug abuse that teens can be involved in. We have a F.A.S.T. program called families and schools together that kids can volunteer with too.
Young people in my community really know how to get everyone pumped up and involved in what they stand for. They help raise money, help the elderly, and are doing a habitat for humanity type thing soon.
What were are doing now! We see diversity and we are trying learn differences about each other so that we can go back from were we came from and use the tactics and strategies in order to make our communities a better place! Not only just for our selves but for those around us!

Please, describe someone you know personally who is making a difference in your community.
My pastor is someone who is making a difference in the community by informing people about Christ, teaching free GED classes and providing a stable environment for these who need aid.
My Pastor is making a difference in my community by being available to be used by God at any moment, for any person.
i don't mean to tute my own horn by i by far think that i am making a difference. I've completed over 60 hours of community service in just 3 years of high school. I've volunteered for shelter Our Sisters, my local council woman and mayor, and i have my own t-shirt line that will be given to kids in Africa once my friend finishes the school in Ghana in 2009. so with a new school they'll also be receiving awesome shirts.
My best friend. She runs Student Government and is always making improvements within our school. She shares her faith will all whether they are willing to listen or not .
My Bishop Author Jones has mad a huge difference in my community. He is always there for people who are in need.
Mr. David Collins because he runs the masten boys and girls club which I am a member of and he encourages teens to do the right thing and he makes us clean the community on occasion.
Someone who makes a difference personally in my community is my boss who i work for at my job at the Rec. Center. She does countless hours of community service and helps young people like me find jobs.
My pastor by giving to those in need and drawing people to Christ thru the love he shows
A girl at my school named Heidi Sigua is someone I admire because she started a club called "Stand" that made a bunch of money and raised a lot of awareness for human trafficking and she got into Stanford afterwards.
My youth pastor made a huge difference in my community when he came to my church and he devoted so much of his time to my youth group and the youth at the school that he held spiritual meetings with on Saturdays.

Who/What in your community is supportive of young people and their efforts to make a difference?
the after school programs
The assistance pastor at my church is very supportive of the youth in which he helps us to devise and execute activities that makes a difference.
My entire Church family urges the youth to go forth in the ministry in any aspect God leads them to. Generally if Both The Pastor and the Assistant/Youth Pastor supports the youth cause then the members will also.
my school for the most part.
The church and families within the church.
Boys and girls clubs
Schools, Churches and other organizations set up to help.
Our school is somewhat supportive. It seems more passively supportive than actively supportive
The bridge of northeast jacksonville
Fighting Back Youth Partnership is a really great support to young people taking control of things that have an effect on them. They input on our school's wellness policy with school lunches and PE, mentor younger kids, have contests within the schools and help other programs get developed to provide even more service opportunities.
Mostly churches are supportive of young people and schools.
Community Connections are trying to take children within bad communities and trying to get them involved into some positive activities that will keep them out of trouble. As well as educate them about our world and ways to better their future.

Are issues that have to do with class, poverty, or socioeconomic status discussed in your faith community?	
Response	If yes, what actions have been taken in light of these discussions?
Yes	n/a
Yes	The actions that have been taken is helping and donating to those who are terrible situations.
Yes	to show where God plays the role in the mist of it all
No	
No	
Yes	Feeding homeless, clothing homeless, providing shelter and providing transportation to church
No	
Yes	The actions that have been taken are charity services as well as donations.
Yes	We try to organize volunteer work in downtown areas but we usually end up asking for donations to send to those that are going to actually volunteer
No	
Yes	Lots of mission trips, fundraisers, and sponsoring people
No	
Yes	Feed the communities, provide clothes for the poor, and tried to get those that wanted jobs, jobs.

Please describe a time when you felt the presence of God in your life.
when i was taking my SAT'S for the first time i thought i was going to fail the test because i didn't understand it and i was use to taking the FCAT.
A time when I felt the presence of God in my life was when I was experiencing issues in my family.
multiple times.. however when i allowed the holy Spirit to completely have his way in me in the midst of my worshipping i felt and experienced the presence of God like never before.
when i finally got my deal with Nike. god has blessed me and assured me that everything is gonna be okay and that I'm gonna be big. with that i never stress anything. . . i know some way or another im gonna be someone.
When I was very upset and contemplated running away from home. I felt as though I was all alone in life and thats when I felt as though Jesus was sitting next to me, as if he was lending me a shoulder to cry on.
Now, Because I feel as if God has done so much for me and he is still doing things. I didn't think I was going to be able to attend YTI but God made a way and I am very thankful
When i got baptised
A time where i felt God in my life was when I got into a car accident, or any other serious life threatening situation.
Anytime I significantly clear my mind of most worldly things and focus on God I can often feel his presence surrounding me
when i was at church i broke down in tears tellin god im sorry
At a Victory Outreach World Youth Conference with kids my age all around me from all over the world just having fun and worshipping God and I felt his presence there.
When the lord granted my wish in which that was for my father to get full custody of me when i was younger.

Currently, what is your most burning question that leaves you unsettled about how you view the world, God, or your place in the world?	When it comes to making sense of your burning questions and life experiences, what activities, people, and resources are most helpful or supportive (e.g. prayer, friends, books, etc.)? Please explain.
why do people have to murder each other to get what they want and over something that just plan DUMB?	my family, teachers, and people at church,
What is my purpose on this earth?	Prayer, family, and friends are helpful.
WHEN WILL I WITNESS THE MIGHTY MIGHTY MOVES OF GOD AS IT WAS OF THE BIBLE DAYS. SEAS PARTED!! THE DEAD RAISED !! THE BLIND EYES OPENED!! ANGELS OF THE LORD WHO COME TO BRING GOOD TIDINGS!!!	PRAYER , AND ACTUALLY LISTENING TO THE WORD WHEN IT IS BEING BROUGHT FORTH THROUGH THE MINISTER.
is there a heaven or hell, is God really black or Jesus even?	going to church?
	family, friends, and prayer
	My step-mom is the person I always turn to when i have question
	my pastor
What will actually happen when we die?	Prayer, as well as any pastor. They might be able to explain to you their thoughts on what could happen.
Why is it that we cannot and should not understand god plan?	For me any interactive source will help me as long as have the opportunity to ask questions.
should homosexuals be allowed to work in the congregation	prayer my pastor
where do the gays fit in?	friends. they love me but they don't really know so i guess they don't help that much
I want someone to just tell me exactly what the trinity is and just lay it out for me so I can see if I really understand it.	writing, praying, relating to my issues through music and books and movies, and talking to my friends help me through anything.
the reason why people preach(pastors in particular) about not doing one thing and them doing it. in one big whole, bigotry.	my parents. they seem to have all the answers to my questions and are very open as to what they think.
What will become of the world when i am gone?	Look at the world now and compare it to years from now(that's if i live that long because tomorrow is not promised to no one).

What issues are you hearing about in the news that have to do with questions of community and diversity? How are these issues talked about and/or dealt with?
Murdering
OBAMA ELECTIONS... LET GOD'S WILL BE DONE!
I can't help you on that one.
Gay marriage.
presidential election with Barak Obama
gay marriage
Gang related issues are talked about and it's really a hard issue to deal with and control.
Violence, Drugs, and Premarital sex. Posters are everywhere you go, commercials are played, and speakers come from everywhere to talk about them.

Appendix D

Dissertation Sermon Codes

Sermon Code	Preacher	Sermon Title Paraphrased	Text	Local/ National	Church Size
02BNFLX	Male	Faith in the Midst of Hard Times	Habakkuk 3: 17	Florida	9000+
03MNMDX	Male	Miraculous Success: Begging for Change	Mark 10:1-4	Maryland	6000+
04NNNYM	Female	God's Time: Great Expectations	Psalms 102	New York	<1000, about 250
05NNTXX	Male	In Your Own Way	Luke 1: 39-56	Texas	30,000+
06NNGAX	Male	Can you cope with hurt in your family?	Gen. 3	Georgia	10,000+
07NLGAS	Male	No Excuse	Exodus 3 and 4	Georgia	<50
08BLGAM	Male	Unity	Eph 3:1-4	Georgia	< 500
09BLGAL	Male	Eaten by Worms	Acts 12:22	Georgia	3000 + (general estimate)
10BNTXX	Male	Family Drama	Gen. 35:9	Texas	9000 +
11ULGAL	Female	A more excellent way	2 Cor. 3:7-18	Georgia	2000+
Tally	M – 8 F – 2			Local – 4 National -- 6	S – 1 M – 2 L – 2 X - 5

CODE KEY: 11ULGAL – Sermon 11 is from a Large Local UCC church in Georgia.

First Two Numbers: Sermon Number, a generic numbering of sermons in the sample

Third Letter: Denomination [N-nondenominational, U- United Church of Christ, M – Methodist (AME, AMEZ, etc.), B – Baptist (National Baptist, Missionary Baptist, etc.), P – Pentecostal (COGIC, Assemblies of God, etc.)]

Fourth Letter: Region and Type of Ministry [L – Local – as defined by a ministry that is mostly focused on local church membership or N- National – as a ministry/pastor with a significant national as well as local following, typically manifest in the types of TV evangelistic ministries and national conferences or speaking tours.] I tend to also make this distinction based on the way that I acquired the sermon audio – through a national website, such as Streaming Faith.org or from a local church visit or book store.

Fifth and Sixth Letter: State Abbreviation

Seventh Letter: Size [X – Mega church (>5000), L – large church (1000-5000), M – Medium sized church (200-999), S – Small (< 200 members)]