

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this final project as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my final project in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this final project. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the final project. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this final project.

Signature:

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.05/03/2024Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

Date

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

Dr. Elizabeth Corrie

Project Consultant

Roger Nam

Director of DMin Program

Abstract

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

This research paper explores practical strategies for Abundant Praise Baptist Church to engage and expand its young adult ministry, specifically targeting African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. While recognizing the importance of cross-generational approaches in fostering a vibrant community, the study delves into innovative methods to bridge the generational gap and create meaningful connections within the congregation. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews and focus groups to glean insights from young adults and established church members. By understanding the distinctive needs, preferences, and challenges the target demographic faces, the paper seeks to identify critical areas of improvement and development within the existing ministry structure.

Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to provide Abundant Praise Baptist Church with practical recommendations to enhance its young adult ministry, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. Ultimately, this research contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on church ministry development, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and adaptability to meet the evolving needs of diverse congregations. The findings aim to guide Abundant Praise Baptist Church in creating a dynamic, cross-generational ministry that resonates with and serves the unique demographic of young African American adults in their community.

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

University of Arizona Global Campus, B.A., 2016

Duke Divinity School, M.Div., 2021

Project Consultant: Dr. Elizabeth Corrie, Ph.D.

A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the

Candler School of Theology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

2024

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

Dr. Elizabeth Corrie

Project Consultant

Roger Nam

Director of DMin Program

Abstract

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

This research paper explores practical strategies for Abundant Praise Baptist Church to engage and expand its young adult ministry, specifically targeting African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. While recognizing the importance of cross-generational approaches in fostering a vibrant community, the study delves into innovative methods to bridge the generational gap and create meaningful connections within the congregation. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews and focus groups to glean insights from young adults and established church members. By understanding the distinctive needs, preferences, and challenges the target demographic faces, the paper seeks to identify critical areas of improvement and development within the existing ministry structure.

Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to provide Abundant Praise Baptist Church with practical recommendations to enhance its young adult ministry, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. Ultimately, this research contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on church ministry development, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and adaptability to meet the evolving needs of diverse congregations. The findings aim to guide Abundant Praise Baptist Church in creating a dynamic, cross-generational ministry that resonates with and serves the unique demographic of young African American adults in their community.

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

University of Arizona Global Campus, B.A., 2016

Duke Divinity School, M.Div., 2021

Project Consultant: Dr. Elizabeth Corrie, Ph.D.

A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the

Candler School of Theology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

2024

Abstract

Cross-Generational Connections: Revitalizing Young Adult Engagement at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church for a Stronger African American Community.

By Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.

This research paper explores practical strategies for Abundant Praise Baptist Church to engage and expand its young adult ministry, specifically targeting African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. While recognizing the importance of cross-generational approaches in fostering a vibrant community, the study delves into innovative methods to bridge the generational gap and create meaningful connections within the congregation. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews and focus groups to glean insights from young adults and established church members. By understanding the distinctive needs, preferences, and challenges the target demographic faces, the paper seeks to identify critical areas of improvement and development within the existing ministry structure.

Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to provide Abundant Praise Baptist Church with practical recommendations to enhance its young adult ministry, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. Ultimately, this research contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on church ministry development, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and adaptability to meet the evolving needs of diverse congregations. The findings aim to guide Abundant Praise Baptist Church in creating a dynamic, cross-generational ministry that resonates with and serves the unique demographic of young African American adults in their community.

Introduction

In the heart of every community, places of worship offer solace and spiritual guidance and act as vital centers for social connection and personal growth. The Abundant Praise Baptist Church¹ stands at a crossroads, uniquely positioned to foster a vibrant, intergenerational community. However, amidst its hallowed halls lies an untapped potential—a chance to engage and expand its young adult ministry more deeply, particularly among African American individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five. In his book *Disruptive Thinking: A Daring Strategy to Change How We Live, Lead, and Love*, Bishop T.D. Jakes says, “The great thing about every new

¹ Abundant Praise Baptist Church is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the actual church researched.

generation is that they are predisposed to test the boundaries. That’s what young people do—they push past the guardrails and try to set their own course.”² However, the question now becomes, how can the Abundant Praise Baptist Church congregation engage and grow its young adult ministry and reach African American young adults ages eighteen to thirty-five in its community through a cross-generational approach?

Through my findings, I delve into the heart of the matter, identifying critical areas for improvement and development within the existing ministry structure. The aim is to cultivate a dynamic, cross-generational place of worship that resonates with twenty-first-century African American life’s distinctive rhythms and realities while blending critical traditions and voices of previous generations. This research aims to empower the members of the congregation, igniting a cross-generational ministry that wields transformative influence in the Abundant Praise Baptist Church and Silverleaf³ community, especially among its young adults. Through this endeavor, I strive to reignite the flame of faith within Abundant Praise Baptist Church, ensuring its radiance for current and future generations.

The Problem:

As I settled into a conversation with a young adult member of Abundant Praise Baptist Church, someone I will call Ava⁴, I immediately sensed her genuine love for Jesus and his word. However, there was a hint of sadness in her eyes as she shared her feelings of disconnection from the ministry at Abundant Praise. The sadness in her eyes became apparent as she opened up and expressed an unwavering belief that her peers possessed unique insights and talents waiting to

² T. D. Jakes, *Disruptive Thinking: A Daring Strategy to Change How We Live, Lead, and Love* (FaithWords, May 2023), pg. 175, Kindle edition.

³ Silverleaf is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the actual community of the church I researched

⁴ Ava is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the young adult interviewed.

connect for the greater good of Abundant Praise. I wanted to know more. I asked her, “am I correct to assume you are sad and feel disconnected from the ministry?” She said yes. I then asked why she felt that way. Ava said, “I believe the older generations only see us as youth, but we are young adults who want our voices heard and to contribute to the church. Sometimes, as young adults, we feel disconnected, our voices are silenced, and our potential is unrealized.”⁵ At that moment, her narrative was a tender call for change, a heartfelt plea for the church to evolve and embrace its young adults’ vibrant energy and untapped potential.

Recent research by the Pew Research Center, as noted by Jolene Erlacher in *Millennials in Ministry*, underscores the decline in religiosity among Americans ages 18 to 35. According to Erlacher, “one in four members of the emerging adult generation is unaffiliated with any particular faith,”⁶ highlighting the extent of this trend. Psychologist and professor Christian Smith, in *Soul in Transition*, further explores the phenomenon, identifying the prevalence of religious indifference or disconnection among many young adults. Smith points out that this disconnect “leads some older adults in the black church to believe that some young adults know or care little about religion or are simply alienated or disinterested in it altogether.”⁷ In conversations with Ava, it became evident that she yearns for a church that embraces and empowers young adults. Ava strongly believes that her generation possesses unique insights and gifts to offer, yet they often feel marginalized and unheard within traditional church settings.

⁵ Interview with Ava, a young adult member female of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church, on November 16, 2023, regarding her views on young adult participation in the ministry.

⁶ Jolene Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2014), Kindle edition, 182-183.

⁷ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle edition, 144.

To understand the notable generational gap and the lack of emerging adults in the congregation at Abundant Praise, it is crucial to consider the perspective Ava and others in her demographic provided. Ava's feedback underscores a broader issue for emerging adults who say, "it is hard to connect with a church whose worship does not appear to come from a place of authenticity and relevant."⁸ She observed that the worship style, specifically the songs and music, failed to resonate with her and potentially other young adults. She suggested a strategic pivot towards more contemporary music styles to bridge this gap. For Ava, a new approach should aim to attract young adults and empower them to lead in worship, showcasing their talents and injecting fresh perspectives into the services. "I appreciate the traditional music at Abundant Praise; however, respectfully, to draw more young adults, we need more than a traditional form of worship to feel alive and experience God in a relevant way."⁹ Ava's insights highlight the need for the church to evolve its worship practices to foster a more inclusive and engaging environment for all congregants, especially the younger generation.

Young adults in Abundant Praise exhibit a profound dedication to values and a broad sense of responsibility toward the well-being of others and the world, challenging stereotypes that suggest otherwise. Grace Duddy Pomroy acknowledges this shift, stating that young adults "care about things other than themselves, and they are willing to support worthy causes."¹⁰ This demographic does not solely seek personal gain; they yearn for a life rich in meaning and connection. Pomroy's insight aligns with the desires of young adults in the congregation for safe

⁸ Interview with Ava, a young adult member female (age 26) of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church, on November 16, 2023, regarding her views on young adult participation in the ministry.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Grace Duddy Pomroy, *Stewardship: What the Church Can Learn from Millennials, Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 2 (April 2018): 11–15.

spaces to express their deep commitment to contributing and connecting meaningfully to noble causes, utilizing their resources and entire beings.

Further supporting this perspective, Dr. Briana Parker highlights the genuine intention of young adults to forge meaningful connections, quoting, “Whatever I can do to get to know people and whatever I can do to develop deeper relationships, I am willing to do.”¹¹ This perspective highlights a significant shift in how young adults perceive their role within religious and community settings. Far from being content with superficial interactions, there is a hunger for depth, authenticity, and purpose in their engagements.

Dr. Parker’s observation aligns with the broader desire among this demographic to be involved in ways that affect real change and promote a more profound understanding among diverse groups. By actively seeking out opportunities to connect on meaningful levels, young adults are signaling their readiness to take on more significant roles within their communities, championing causes, and driving initiatives that reflect their values and aspirations. Their approach is about fostering personal growth and contributing to the enrichment and resilience of their communal spaces.

The significant shift in religious demographics between 2009 and 2019, particularly among individuals aged 18 to 38—the largest living demographic—underscores the urgent need for Abundant Praise Baptist Church and African American churches to engage young adults more authentically and relevantly. During this period, “the proportion of young adults identifying as Christians decreased by 16 percentage points, with a similar trend observed among Black Americans, who experienced an 11 percentage point decline in Christian identification.”¹²

¹¹ Brianna Parker, *I Still Believe in the Black Church: Using Data to Decode the Promise and Pain of the Black Church* (Mansfield, Texas: Black Millennial Café, 2021), Kindle edition, 68.

¹² “ETD | Engaging Black Millennials Ages 25-35 in Spiritual Formation and Leadership

Ava’s insights were particularly enlightening for my research project, highlighting the necessity for congregations to address the concerns of young adults and ensure their visibility and representation within the church community.

I agree with Scott Cormode, who emphasizes the importance of empathy in church leadership and notes that it should never be judgmental. “Empathy is crucial because the prevailing stereotype of the church in culture is that Christians are judgmental—a perception supported that young adults who do not attend church view Christians as such.”¹³ The perspectives shared by Ava and Cormode illustrate the challenges and opportunities churches face when connecting with younger generations.

The Abundant Praise congregation faces a pivotal challenge in bridging the connection gap between its older members and the younger adult demographic, a concern highlighted by Ava’s perspective. This critical need for a transformational journey to establish a more inclusive and engaging environment for all generations. “A generation of young Christians believes that the churches they were raised in are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts. . .,”¹⁴ However, in light of these insights, it becomes evident that addressing the concerns of young adult members requires the Abundant Praise Congregation to adopt a proactive, deliberate, and strategic approach. This involves church leadership and older adults intentionally fostering connections and promoting engagement across generations.

A Deeper Problem In Abundant Praise

¹³ Cormode Scott, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2020), pg. 59.

¹⁴ David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), Kindle edition, 11.

A thorough examination of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church's organizational dynamics, prompted by a dialogue with Ava, has revealed a significant gap in the congregation's ministry offerings, particularly the absence of a dedicated ministry for engaging young adults aged eighteen to thirty-five. I concur with Ava's insights, particularly noting that we both arrived at Abundant Praise on the same Sunday of August 2022, providing a unique perspective of how the church engages its members. For example, our church conducts a children's service in the fellowship hall concurrently with the main worship service, and our youth group engages in various activities, including trips to theme parks and organizing collections for donations and care packages for a women's shelter. Additionally, our senior members participate actively in the Gospel choir and regularly visit the sick and the homebound.

However, it has become evident that we lack specific offerings for members aged eighteen to thirty-five, an area that requires our immediate attention to foster a more inclusive worshipping community. The cross-generational ministry approach will challenge Abundant Praise to develop a balanced approach, especially with young adults. This transformative approach necessitates recognizing and addressing the evolving needs and aspirations of both the established older members and the sought-after young adult demographic.

Some leaders struggle with when to fully surrender areas to younger adults with full authority, although that is not a corporate struggle. In the secular world, younger adults are leading departments and starting thriving businesses, which proves that "people don't have to be 60 years old before you trust them with leadership."¹⁵ This issue raises pivotal questions about the adaptability and relevance of the church in shepherding individuals through crucial phases of

¹⁵ Brianna Parker, *I Still Believe in the Black Church: Using Data to Decode the Promise and Pain of the Black Church* (Mansfield, Texas: Black Millennial Café, 2021), Kindle Edition, 132.

life and faith. Likewise, the absence of a specialized young adult ministry within the Abundant Praise Baptist Church unfolds as a multifaceted problem, demanding a discerning perspective to grasp its implications on emerging generations' spiritual journey and community engagement.

Addressing this issue involves a comprehensive understanding of the critical dynamics within the ecclesiastical setting. While many adults want their young people connected with their faith communities, “. . . their approaches often reinforce religious passivity that discourages their agency in actively constructing their own identities.”¹⁶ More significantly, deprived of a tailored support structure, African American young adults often find themselves negotiating the intricate path to adulthood without the specific guidance and resources that a dedicated ministry could furnish.

This absence of concentrated attention heightens feelings of isolation and disconnection, creating obstacles to forming a robust and supportive community. In echoing similar sentiments, Ava subtly illuminated the far-reaching implications of this predicament. One debilitating result of fear is the inability to see beyond the facade of power or the visage of weakness and to glimpse the power that lies within. “For meaningful connections to be forged, individuals and communities must face fear head-on.”¹⁷ More significantly, Abundant Praise urgently needs to enhance its ministry's focus to tackle the unique obstacles confronting young African American adults and empower them on their quest to build significant relationships and successfully traverse the complex terrain of their growth path.

¹⁶ Steven C. Argue, "Empathy with Emerging Generation as a Foundation for Ministry." *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2020): pg. 110–129.

¹⁷ Reyes, Patrick B.. *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2021), Kindle edition, 239.

Furthermore, the unique issues and concerns faced by African American young adults, rooted in cultural, societal, and historical contexts, may go unaddressed, further perpetuating a sense of neglect. A ministry that spans generations, anchored in love and respect for every age group, and focused on a vibrant young adult ministry can provide mentorship, direction, and a secure environment for open discussions about unique challenges. Haydn Shaw argues that in this phase of life, “young adults often find themselves caught in a state of transition, feeling neither fully adolescent nor firmly settled into adulthood.”¹⁸

The breadth of freedom and options at their disposal can be exhilarating, yet the task of shaping their identity within this shifting societal context can also be overwhelming. In my observations, the young adult in Abundant Praise “. . . seek solace in the guidance of older generations willing to accompany them on their journey as they navigate this period of uncertainty and self-discovery.”¹⁹ Such an approach nurtures a feeling of inclusion and empowerment among this demographic. By recognizing and actively addressing the needs of African American young adults, a well-structured ministry can play a dynamic role in facilitating personal growth, community engagement, and spiritual development among this crucial segment of the church population.

The cross-generational approach captures the nuanced perspectives of young adults and established congregation members, offering a comprehensive understanding of the aspirations, challenges, and spiritual quests that define them. Each congregation holds the capacity to reveal its essence of intergenerational unity, striving to become a deliberately inclusive community that supports and enriches the spiritual life of people from all age brackets. Doing so “. . . prepares

¹⁸ Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future Is Bright* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 131.

¹⁹ Ibid.

them to embody the teachings of Jesus Christ in today's society, guiding them to navigate life's journey as his disciples with resilience and purpose."²⁰ More significantly, listening intently and blending each generation's voices aims to bridge the generational divide, crafting innovative pathways that foster meaningful connections and ensure that every member of our church family feels valued, understood, and integral to our collective spiritual journey.

Historical Contexts

The African American church stands as the sole institution that emerged from the era of slavery and was fostered within the realm of social activism. More to the point, as James Cone, the lead architect of the Black Theology movement, once professed, "The African American Church is the most important institution in the African American community."²¹ The historical significance of the Black church in the African American community cannot be overstressed. Since its inception during the slavery era, "the Black church has been a cornerstone of hope, resilience, and liberation for African American people."²² It served as a spiritual refuge and a pivotal institution in the struggle for civil rights, embodying the sacred connection between faith and social justice. For young adults in the twenty-first century and in the Abundant Praise Baptist Church congregation, reinvigorating this historical legacy means creating a ministry that acknowledges and draws strength from these roots, ensuring that the church remains a beacon of hope and a catalyst for change in their lives and the broader community.

²⁰ Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto, *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, & Serving Faithfully* (Naugatuck, CT: Lifelong Faith Associates, 2014), Kindle Edition, 51.

²¹ Wayne E. Croft Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020), chap. 1

²² Ibid.

The Black church's tradition of empowerment has always extended beyond the spiritual, touching every aspect of African American life. It has been a place for education, political meetings, and community support, embodying the idea that “. . . faith is lived and experienced in the world as much as in the church.”²³ For young African American adults today, integrating this empowerment tradition into the ministry involves spiritual growth and fostering a sense of agency in their personal and communal lives. By doing so, Abundant Praise Baptist Church can provide a platform for young adults to engage with contemporary issues—such as racial inequality, economic injustice, and political disenfranchisement—within a framework informed by their rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

Moreover, historically, the Black church has been a nurturing ground for leadership and talent within the African American community. Influential African American young adults led movements to advance progress for their community and the world, such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and countless others found their voices within the church, using it as a launching pad for activism and community organization. For the young adult ministry at Abundant Praise, tapping into this tradition means creating opportunities for leadership development, mentorship, and community engagement. By doing so, the church can empower young adults to take on leadership roles both within the ministry and in the broader society, continuing the church's legacy of producing leaders who are as spiritually grounded as they are socially engaged.

Finally, the sense of community and collective identity fostered by the Black church has been a source of strength and solidarity for African Americans throughout history. In the face of

²³ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*, (New York, NY, New York University Press, 2014), Kindle edition, 169.

systemic racism and social exclusion, the church has offered a space where African American identity and culture are affirmed and celebrated. For the Abundant Praise Baptist Church's young adults, embracing this tradition goes beyond speaking in faith alone, hoping society's ills will fix themselves. It also means creating an inclusive environment that honors the diversity of African American experiences while fostering a strong sense of community. Through cultural events, discussion groups, and service projects, the ministry can celebrate the rich tapestry of African American life, providing young adults with a sense of belonging and a connection to a vibrant community that supports and uplifts them. This approach honors the church's historical role as a central institution in African American life and ensures its continued significance and vitality in the lives of young adults today.

Cultural

In the fabric of African American culture, “the church has stood as a beacon of hope, community, and resilience. . .”²⁴ It has been the cradle of civil rights movements, a platform for powerful oratory that inspired change, and a sanctuary where the African American spirit has been nurtured against the backdrop of systemic inequality and racial injustice. Within this context, a ministry that caters specifically to the needs of young adults can serve as a crucial bridge between generations, ensuring the transmission of cultural wisdom, historical truths, and spiritual strength. Such a ministry reinforces the community's fabric by fostering an environment where young African Americans can explore their identities, confront societal challenges, and cultivate leadership skills. It prepares the next generation to navigate the complexities of the modern world with confidence and faith.

²⁴ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2017) Kindle edition, 58.

Moreover, the unique challenges faced by African American young adults—ranging from racial profiling and educational disparities to economic inequities—demand targeted support and understanding. A ministry focused on this demographic recognizes these challenges not as abstract issues but as lived experiences that affect daily life. Dr. Briana Parker notes that the church must always be open to being both the mentor and mentee with no regard to age. “We have to learn from each other beyond social media and history. We can open our hearts to the possibility of learning from anyone.”²⁵ By providing mentorship, the ministry acts as a compass, guiding young adults through these trials with wisdom drawn from a deep well of cultural and spiritual heritage. This mentorship is not just about navigating societal obstacles but about affirming the value of African American life, culture, and contributions, fostering a strong sense of identity and purpose.

Creating a secure space for open dialogue cannot be overstated. In a society where African American voices are often marginalized or silenced, a ministry dedicated to young adults offers a platform for these voices to be heard, respected, and valued. Through open discussions about issues like racial discrimination, mental health, and social justice, young adults are empowered to communicate their stories, learn from one another, and forge solidarity. This nurtures a sense of belonging and community and ignites a collective determination to enact change within the church and the wider society.

Finally, by integrating young adults into the church’s broader mission, a ministry can continue leveraging its unique talents, perspectives, and energies to rejuvenate and innovate traditional practices and outreach efforts. This inclusion signals respect for their contributions

²⁵ Brianna Parker, *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age* (Dallas, TX: Black Millennial Cafe, LLC), Kindle edition, 128

and a recognition of their role in shaping the church's future. It cultivates a vibrant, dynamic community that honors its roots while eagerly embracing progress. In this way, a ministry that prioritizes the empowerment of African American young adults addresses their immediate needs and sows the seeds for a future where the church continues to stand as a pillar of strength, unity, and transformation within the African American community.

The Abundant Praise Baptist Church

Abundant Praise Baptist Church, deeply rooted in the Silverleaf community of Durham, NC, embodies resilience and adaptability against the backdrop of societal and generational shifts. Founded in 1966 during a period fraught with racial tensions, the church has consistently been a pillar of strength and support, underscored by the ownership of a 7,000-square-foot building since 1968. Despite the challenges of fluctuating membership—from over 200 in 2010 to a low of fifty in 2019, to currently stabilizing at 110 dedicated members as of 2023. However, the congregation is a diverse blend of professionals, including educators, doctors, and city board members, representing the middle-class African American demographic. This variety suggests a strong foundation for leadership and growth.

However, a significant leadership gap exists with emerging adults, primarily due to the dominance of older members in leadership roles. This oversight potentially marginalizes younger members, impacting the church's ability to foster a new generation of leaders. Demographically, the church is varied: 40% seniors, 30% middle-aged adults, 20% children, and 10% emerging adults. Despite this diversity, a challenge persists in bridging the generational divide. One Gen Xer, I will call Ralph, remarked to me in a one-on-one meeting that “sometimes it is disheartening that some older members often perceive those of us who have grown up within the church as perpetually young, which creates tension, especially among members who have evolved from childhood to adulthood within the church's community and

now seek acknowledgment of our adult status.”²⁶ This sentiment underscores a critical aspect of the generational tension within the congregation, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach that recognizes and values the maturity and contributions of all its members, regardless of their age or the length of their tenure within the church.

Abundant Praise’s Shifting Narrative

Since the 1960s, Abundant Praise has served as a focal point for African Americans residing in the Silverleaf Community of Durham, NC, offering a source of support and guidance. The church’s narrative includes history, tradition, community engagement, and spiritual zeal. Situated at the heart of this residential area, Abundant Praise stood as a beacon of cohesion; however, it is noteworthy that there is a noticeable absence of church members among the demographic aged eighteen to thirty-five. Despite its advantageous location, with a well-maintained parking lot and neighboring amenities such as Abundant Praise School and Abundant Praise Park, one is prompted to question the factors contributing to the limited attendance from young people of the local community.

Since the early 2000s, the church has increasingly focused on internal maintenance at the expense of its social support roles within the community, a shift that has become problematic. This inward focus detracts from the church’s longstanding tradition of community service, including running a food pantry and providing transportation for those wishing to attend services. Such services were particularly poignant given Silverleaf’s history as a major slave plantation headquarters, with the church providing a beacon of hope amidst the lingering trauma of racial tensions. Furthermore, this shift away from community engagement hinders the church’s

²⁶ Ralph is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the Gen Xer I had a one-on-one meeting with on March 2023.

potential to reach new members, especially emerging adults within the Silverleaf community, who may seek dynamic and outward-facing community involvement.

This evolving emphasis on internal concerns over community engagement presents a critical juncture for Abundant Grace. Embracing inclusivity and openness and recognizing the need for adaptation to remain relevant and supportive of its diverse congregation's needs are more crucial than ever. This approach is vital for creating an environment where the contributions of both longstanding and emerging adult members are valued, bridging gaps within the church community and reinvigorating its role as a community pillar. Balancing the cherished traditions with evolving community needs will be vital to fostering a vibrant, inclusive congregation that regains its commitment to serve as a source of strength and unity within Silverleaf.

Indeed, as Abundant Praise navigates the complex landscape of historical racial tensions and evolving community needs, the necessity for fostering open dialogue and understanding between generations becomes increasingly evident. Conversely, many older members adhere firmly to traditional practices, deriving comfort, continuity, and solace from traditions shaped by the harrowing memories and realities of Jim Crow laws and segregation. These traditions, for some, serve as vital anchors for maintaining cultural identity and resilience amidst the echoes of past injustices. More significantly, embracing change is essential for growth and effectively reaching and uplifting the community that Abundant Praise serves.

THE THEOLOGICAL ASPECT OF ABUNDANT PRAISE

From my observations, the young adults of Abundant Praise desire the church to recapture a theology deeply rooted in the principles of loving God and neighbor, as demonstrated through Jesus' teachings, sermons, and practices. For instance, after preaching the sermon, "Speak Up And Be Bold For Jesus," from John chapter nine, many young people came up to me

and said, “Thank you for preaching this, pastor, about time; I believe you get it!”²⁷ The sermon was about Jesus healing a young man who was born blind. However, the young man did not know who healed him. They asked his parents, who were fearful of the religious leaders of their time, who had done it. The parents said, “he is of age; he can speak for himself” (John 9:21).²⁸ This theology, reflective of Jesus’s ministry, emphasizes the dynamic impact of spiritual connection on communal life, challenging power structures, confronting injustice, and advocating for the marginalized.

Jesus’s actions against government tyranny, corrupt religious institutions, and various forms of oppression underscore the interconnectedness and cooperative relationship that Abundant Praise now strives to emulate within its community. However, a notable aspect of Abundant Praise’s theological stance is its engagement with and critique of patriarchal language. Observations from Bible Studies and member interactions on Zoom reveal that God is frequently referred to with male pronouns and traditional gender roles are often emphasized. However, I am mindful of the issues with such language, encouraging the congregation to use more inclusive terminology. Likewise, I updated the Church Covenant to reflect a more inclusive approach. My initiative aligns with acknowledgment of the need for mutual respect across gender, age, class, and political beliefs, embodying the love ethic preached by Jesus.

Furthermore, a high Christological theology mirroring the wider African American Baptist tradition is central to the congregation’s belief system. Abundant Praise acknowledges the universal interconnectedness of God’s community. However, to fully walk in the love of Jesus, the congregation must include those considered enemies and promote a community ethos

²⁷ A response from young people after hearing the Sermon, “Speak Up An Be Bold For Christ,” March 2023

²⁸ John 9:21, New International Version (KJV).

of love, even towards the difficult to love, thereby creating a space for transformation and mutual respect. This approach to theology and community life is succinctly described as “love,” reflecting a deep commitment to the principles of Scripture as the authoritative guide for faith and practice, the significance of Baptism, and the philosophy of “every-member ministry”²⁹ in the Abundant Praise member orientation handbook. These principles highlight the collective responsibility of the congregation to embody the Christian witness and strive to build God’s beloved community despite existing generational gaps and how these theological practices currently look on the ground.

Abundant Praise Baptist Church stands at a pivotal crossroads, facing the challenge of bridging generational divides and addressing the pressing social ills that besiege its community. Over time, Abundant Praise Baptist Church has transitioned towards prioritizing spiritual matters, deviating from its historical theological commitments and emphasizing direct engagement with oppression. This shift contrasts its earlier stance, which advocated for practical solutions to societal issues as an integral aspect of its ministry. This foundational belief underscores the necessity for the church to evolve beyond its traditional focus on spiritual matters alone and to actively engage with the contemporary struggles of its younger members, notably issues such as suicide, poverty, gun violence, and the presence of gangs. Young people within the church express a sense of confinement, urging the church to broaden its mission to address these forms of societal oppression.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ABUNDANT PRAISE

²⁹ Abundant Praise Baptist Church, *New Member Orientation Guide*, pg. 22. Durham, NC: Abundant Praise Baptist Church, January 1, 2023.

In my observation, the quest to balance traditional and contemporary worship styles at The Abundant Praise Baptist Church raised profound questions about our congregation's spiritual needs and identity. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of a permanent pastor for nearly a year profoundly affected Abundant Praise's worship practices, pushing us toward a crucial reflection on our worship's purpose and presentation. For Abundant Praise, this period of transition, marked by the shift from choir-led to Praise team-led services and the discontinuation of printed programs, not only disrupted the usual flow but also laid bare the congregation's hesitation towards change. It underscores a broader dilemma: how to harmonize traditional and contemporary elements in a way that resonates with all congregation members.

Amidst these challenges, the Abundant Praise congregation finds itself at a crossroads, reflecting on what constitutes meaningful worship in our context. The traditional aspects of our services and the aesthetic of the sacred space coexist with the desire for more contemporary practices, signaling a community in transition. Yet, this blend sometimes leads to what I've perceived as 'liturgical whiplash,' where the seamless integration of different worship styles becomes jarring. Observing the congregation's response—ranging from occasional engagement with contemporary worship music to a noticeable disengagement of young people during more traditional segments—highlights the complexity of meeting the spiritual desires of a congregation that spans a broad spectrum of worship preferences. This juxtaposition invites us to reimagine our worship practices, striving for a cohesive experience that honors our rich traditions while fusing contemporary vibrancy that young people can appreciate, potentially fostering a shared sense of spiritual connection and community.

The Abundant Praise Baptist Church is navigating the challenges of ministry in a post-pandemic world, grappling with leadership voids and defining its identity amidst evolving community expectations. My tenure of less than two years at Abundant Praise has illuminated the congregation's intricate process of self-discovery and its cautious approach toward embracing change. Initially, I perceived the primary challenge of my ministry here as being the newcomer; however, it quickly became apparent that the congregation was in the midst of piecing together its identity, a task complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Observations from a deacons' meeting in September 2022 revealed an openness among a majority to redefine ministry, focusing on engaging the younger generation, indicating a readiness to diverge from tradition.³⁰ However, the vision and mission of the church remained ambiguous.

The need for clear leadership and direction was starkly evident in conversations with youth leaders. Their expectation for me to outline their roles highlighted a broader issue of a lack of established structures within the ministry. This sentiment was echoed by Sister Clara, whom I spoke with in late September 2022, who pointed out the dampening effect of a domineering leadership style on her enthusiasm and participation. She confessed, "I do not like working with leaders who shut out young people or only want things the old way."³¹ Her experience underscores the importance of fostering a leadership environment that values and respects diverse voices, ensuring no one feels marginalized or unheard. This approach aims to fill leadership gaps that have emerged over the past decade and recognizes the critical role of young people and community engagement in the church's future vitality.

³⁰ Meeting with the Deacon Board at the Abundant Praise Baptist Church in September 2022

³¹ Quick discussion I had with Sis. Clara, late September 2022, Clara is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the Gen Xer I spoke to after the worship service.

The juxtaposition of traditional values with the imperative to adapt to new societal norms presents Abundant Praise Baptist Church with unique challenges and opportunities. As one of the younger individuals brought into a leadership role, I am part of the church's response to these challenges. The commitment to understanding and integrating the needs and perspectives of the younger generation, coupled with a renewed focus on community participation, signals Abundant Praise's need to be relevant and impactful in a rapidly changing world. This case study of Abundant Praise's journey through a period of introspection and external pressures offers valuable insights into the complexities of church leadership and community engagement in contemporary society.

The notable organizational discrepancy in Abundant Praise invites scrutiny of the church's inclusivity and adaptability. It sparks an inquiry into the potential implications for the spiritual and communal development of the targeted demographic. Beyond the surface of this absence lies a more profound concern: the possible inadequacy in addressing the sole needs and challenges faced by individuals navigating the crucial phase of early adulthood. By dissecting this nuanced challenge, we can gain deeper insights into the church's mission and its capacity to cultivate a sense of belonging and spiritual growth among the emerging generation within the congregation. More significantly, recognizing this critical void catalyzes a comprehensive examination, urging a more profound exploration into the underlying dynamics shaping the congregational landscape.

In adopting a critical observant perspective, the 'revolving door' phenomenon among young adults in the church suggests more than a structural gap; "...it implies a disconnect between the church's outreach strategies and this demographic's evolving spiritual and

communal needs.”³² This gap emerges as a focal point for a more comprehensive investigation into Abundant Praise’s evolving role in meeting its members’ diverse needs, particularly during this pivotal stage of life. Empowering them to lead collaboratively with the older generation is vital. “Cross-generational service helps narrow the generation gap between older and younger church members.”³³ Consequently, fostering an environment of mutual understanding and collaboration becomes imperative for the church’s continued relevance and effectiveness in nurturing its young adults and the community of Silverleaf.

It becomes evident that for Abundant Praise to succeed and impact all generations, making cross-generational connections increases the chance to learn from and respect those slightly different from themselves. Reflecting the prevailing wisdom that for Abundant Praise to break free from its proverbial shell, it must foster a deep sense of fellowship. This approach is vital for establishing new connections and eradicating the fear that often accompanies isolation. Such fellowship, rooted in mutual respect and understanding, can empower the congregation to recognize and respond to the universal human desires for peace, love, shelter, nourishment, family, and connection. It positions the church as a sanctuary where all people can have their basic needs met, echoing Jesus’ miraculous provision for the hungry crowds with two fish and five loaves (John 6:1-14 KJV)³⁴. This biblical narrative highlights the transformative power of Jesus’ theology and leadership style, transcending generational and demographic divides and mandating a holistic approach to ministry that combines compassion and action.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto, *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, & Serving Faithfully*, (Naugatuck, CT: Lifelong Faith Associates, 2014), Kindle edition, chapter 5.

³⁴ John 6:1-14, King James Version (KJV).

At Abundant Praise, my commitment to ministering in the name of Jesus Christ entails fostering communal connections and healing within the Silverleaf area and addressing the generational gap that threatens the fabric of our community. This divine mission, while challenging, beckons our congregation to stretch beyond our comfort zones to teach and remind ourselves of our collective identity as God's people engaged in meaningful ministry. By pursuing a ministry approach that mirrors Jesus' inclusive and adaptive leadership, Abundant Praise must aim to bridge the gap between generations and empower every congregation member. Moreover, our advocacy for God's justice in the community and our commitment to fostering cross-generational connections must reflect a proactive response to the church's current lack of engagement among different age groups.

On the other hand, the younger generation in Abundant Praise advocates for progress and change, seeking to transcend the constraints imposed by past injustices. They perceive the reverence for historical roots as essential but believe it should not restrict the church's evolution or response to contemporary social issues. This generational divide underscores the importance of creating spaces within the church and the wider community where open and respectful conversations can occur, allowing for a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation. Such dialogue is essential for bridging gaps, fostering mutual understanding, and ensuring that the church remains a relevant and unifying force in addressing both the legacy of the past and the challenges of the present.

THE YOUNG ADULT PERSPECTIVE OF ABUNDANT PRAISE

The aspiration among young African-American adults in Abundant Praise for a transformation within the church marks a significant shift in focus from solely spiritual

nourishment to a more comprehensive approach that integrates faith, social issues, community engagement, and the wisdom of older generations. This desire is deeply embedded in their knowledge of “. . .the historical legacy of the Civil Rights Era, during which Abundant Praise served as a spiritual sanctuary and a hub of activism and societal change.”³⁵ Inspired by this history, the younger generation seeks to reclaim the church’s role as a beacon of hope and progress in the battle against social injustices. They advocate for a holistic approach that values their voices and leverages faith as a means for personal salvation and as a catalyst for action and community transformation, as the older generation did, but in new and innovative ways. This evolving perspective underscores the importance of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church in addressing the multifaceted challenges facing African-American communities today, highlighting a yearning for an institution that reflects the dynamic interplay between faith and social activism.

Cason³⁶, a young adult member of Abundant Praise, contends that “my generation seeks guidance from the elders, but some of the older adults insist on replicating their methods without deviation.”³⁷ In the evolving landscape of leadership within communities, young adults are expressing a nuanced appreciation for the historical significance of past leaders while advocating for a more all-encompassing and diverse approach to leadership within their movements. Traditionally, leaders were often central figures, guiding the direction of their communities with authority and influence. Cason’s thoughts align with how some young people think about the church and its relevance following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which

³⁵ Abundant Praise Baptist Church, *New Member Orientation Guide*, pg. 5. Durham, NC: Abundant Praise Baptist Church, January 1, 2023.

³⁶ Cason is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the young adult interviewed.

³⁷ Interview with Cason, a young adult member of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church, on November 16, 2023, regarding his views on strategies the Abundant Praise Baptist Church congregation can use to ensure young adult participation in the ministry.

echoes young people losing their lives throughout the Silverleaf community and the broader Durham Community³⁸.

Contemporary young adults are eager to embrace innovative methods and exhibit boldness in their church and community involvement approaches. This evolving dynamic is further emphasized by conversations with young adults like Tasha³⁹ from Abundant Praise, who highlights the desire among her peers to not only adopt but also adapt and refine traditional methods to better align with the needs and context of their generation. Tasha articulates this sentiment: “While young people are keen to adopt the strategies of past generations, we aim to adapt and refine traditional methods better to suit the needs and context of our generation.”⁴⁰ Tasha’s statement highlights the dynamic interplay between preserving tradition and embracing innovation, highlighting the younger generation’s desire to contribute meaningfully to the community’s evolution.

Through the insights Tasha, a compelling narrative emerges, advocating for a more inclusive, responsive, and adaptable church to the evolving landscape of faith and activism. This narrative highlights the shifting paradigms within the Black church. It underlines the critical role of cross-generational leadership in facilitating a church model that transcends traditional boundaries and resonates with the aspirations and challenges of contemporary young adults. Rather than completely discarding the principles and practices of the past, young people in the congregation seek to integrate them with innovative approaches that address today’s pressing

³⁸ Interview with Cason, a Abundant Praise Baptist Church member, on November 16, 2023, regarding his views on police brutality and gang violence in the Silverleaf community.

³⁹ Tasha is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the young adult interviewed.

⁴⁰ Interview with Tasha, a Abundant Praise Baptist Church member, on November 16, 2023, regarding her views on police brutality and gang violence in the Silverleaf community.

issues. They understand the importance of honoring tradition while acknowledging the need for adaptation and evolution.

Central to the aspirations of young adults of Abundant Praise is a sense of urgency to confront the challenges of today, particularly those related to social justice and human suffering. Dave⁴¹, a young adult male, echoed this sentiment: “I wish the older generations recognized that simply offering prayers and good intentions is not enough; tangible action is required to effect meaningful change.”⁴² While prayer holds significance in their spiritual lives, they emphasize the importance of coupling it with proactive steps toward addressing injustice and alleviating suffering.

In exploring the dynamics of cross-generational collaboration within Abundant Praise, Mia⁴³ emphasized the significance of such an approach in her statement, “It would benefit me, other young adults, and Abundant Praise to pursue a balanced approach to leadership and action because, as a young adult, I desire cross-generational partnerships within our congregations and community.”⁴⁴ This sentiment underpins the argument that engaging diverse age groups in leadership and community activities not only enriches the experiences of young adults but also enhances the vibrancy and effectiveness of the community as a whole. Young individuals like Mia value the wisdom and expertise of the older generations, aspiring to merge these attributes with the dynamism and fresh perspectives of younger members.

⁴¹ Dave is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the young adult interviewed.

⁴² I interviewed Dave, a member of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church, on November 16, 2023, about his feelings about what the older generation can do to support young people’s approach to ministry.

⁴³ Mia is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the young adult interviewed.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mia, a young adult member of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church.

As represented by Mia, emerging adults within the Abundant Praise community advocate for a church that actively engages in community projects and advocacy work, viewing this involvement as a direct manifestation of their faith's core values of equality, justice, and compassion. Mia believes that such engagement not only exemplifies the lived principles of their faith but also strengthens intergenerational bonds within Abundant Praise. This stance suggests a pathway for fostering deeper connections among members of varying ages, thereby reinforcing the community's alignment with the foundational tenets of their religious beliefs.

Young African Americans in Abundant Praise Baptist Church crave a church experience “. . .that resonates with their reality, one that acknowledges and actively participates in the ongoing struggles for racial justice, economic equality, and social reform.”⁴⁵ Through this research, I discovered that young adults of Abundant Praise seek a vibrant and flexible church, are eager to question conventional norms, and embrace innovative approaches to worship and community engagement that resonates with contemporary society's multifaceted realities. More significantly, the call from young African-American adults is for a church that embodies the spirit of the Civil Rights era in its willingness to engage with the world beyond its walls.

They envision a church that cares for its members' spiritual well-being and serves as a formidable force for social change. This involves a collective effort to listen, understand, and act upon the concerns of the younger generation, fostering a community that is both spiritually fulfilling and actively committed to making a tangible difference in society. By embracing this vision, the Abundant Praise Baptist Church could again become a source of inspiration and a

⁴⁵ Al Sharpton, *Righteous Troublemakers: Untold Stories of the Social Justice Movement in America* (New York, NY; Hanover Square Press, 2022), Kindle edition, 137.

catalyst for change, staying true to its historical roots while evolving to meet the needs and aspirations of its diverse congregation.

Indeed, embracing the diversity of perspectives within the congregation is essential for crafting a more inclusive and unified future. By valuing and respecting its community's varied experiences and viewpoints, Abundant Praise can pave the way for a vision that honors its rich history while welcoming growth and transformation. Through my research, I have gained insight into the congregation's perception of its current stage within the life cycle of Abundant Praise. However, while some members may be open to venturing into uncharted territory, there is a notable hesitancy among others.

The Cross-Generational Focus Group Conversation

Facilitator, Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.: Thank you for joining this focus group discussion. How can Abundant Praise Baptist Church effectively engage and support African American young adults (ages 18-35)?

Participant 1: "Community engagement, for me, is like creating this deep sense of belonging, you know? It's not just about going through the motions at church; it's about building a real connection with the community. I've found that it's like having a second family, where you feel seen and heard. And it's not just during official church activities; it's about the little moments, the friendships, and the shared experiences. That's what makes it special. It's a support system that goes beyond the usual, offering emotional and relational support that feels genuine and authentic. It's not just about the religious aspect; it's about being part of something bigger, where everyone's got your back through thick and thin."

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.: Great insights. Regarding mentorship programs, how would you envision such a program being effective for young adults?

Participant 2: “The whole mentorship thing should be a two-way street. I feel people in our age group need mentors who understand our challenges, not just spiritually, but in our personal and professional lives. Regular check-ins and guidance on career stuff – that kind of mentorship would make Lakeview and engagement with our elders really impactful. It’s like having someone who gets what you’re going through and is there to help you navigate life’s ups and downs.”

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.: Absolutely. Moving on to inclusivity, how can the church welcome and empower young African-American adults to take on leadership roles within the church to address social issues and contribute to the broader Durham community?

Participant 3: “Making sure the church is welcoming and inclusive? It’s all about diverse leadership, no doubt. We need leaders who get where we’re coming from and bring different perspectives to the table. When our leaders reflect the diversity in our community, it makes the church way more relatable and inviting. It’s about having voices that understand the various experiences within our demographic. So, diverse leadership is a must – it’s like creating a space where everyone feels seen and understood. That’s what will make the church vibe welcoming for us, especially as young adults.”

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.: Well said. Lastly, when I first came to Abundant Praise, I noticed that there was a ministry for youth but not for young adults. How do you feel about having a young adult ministry at Abundant Praise Baptist Church?

Participant 5: “When I first got to Abundant Praise and saw a ministry for youth but not for us young adults, I felt like something was missing. Having a young adult ministry at Abundant Praise would be fantastic. It’s about time we had our space to connect, grow, and contribute.

The thought of a young adult ministry excites me—it’s a chance for us to thrive and make a real impact in our community. Having an open lane to express ourselves at Abundant Praise would bring a refreshing vibe and a sense of belonging. I’m all for it!”

Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr.: Thank you for sharing these valuable perspectives. More significantly, your responses helped guide my research to understand the importance of nurturing unity and inclusivity and advance my perspective about fostering a cross-generational ministry at Abundant Praise Baptist Church.

The Rationale for My Project

Following discussions with Ava, Cason, Dave, and Mia – young adult members at Abundant Praise Baptist Church, and the focus group, I was stimulated to develop a Cross-Generational ministry strategy in the Abundant Praise Baptist Church to empower and engage young adults within Abundant Praise. This reflection led to the proposal to establish a Cross-Generational Connection Team tasked with spearheading this transformative initiative. The composition of this team is pivotal, bringing together young adults and senior members who share a deep commitment to empowering the younger generations and a fervent desire to instigate positive change within the congregation.

The central rationale for the Abundant Praise Cross-Generational Connection Supper stems from Abundant Praise’s newly formed Connection Teams’ desire to foster deeper intergenerational relationships within the congregation, Silverleaf, particularly within the confines of the church, aiming to nurture and support the young adult population. It underscores the critical importance of generational collaboration in addressing the church’s challenges and mission as a beacon for community building and support.

Abundant Praise’s Cross-Generational Connection Supper Initiative

The Cross-Generational Connection Supper, meticulously organized by Abundant Praise's cross-generational planning team, aimed to strengthen the fabric of the community by fostering a "brave space" for open dialogue, encouraging new friendships, and enhancing community bonds. This ambitious objective, focused on more than just bridging generational gaps, emphasized collective action and shared values to promote unity and mutual support across generations.

In the heart of Durham, the Abundant Praise Baptist Church embarked on a transformative journey to bridge the generational gap within its congregation. The inception of this groundbreaking initiative was catalyzed by a focus group discussion led by Shawn D. Lipscomb, Sr., which unveiled a profound desire among African American young adults for deeper community engagement, mentorship, inclusivity, and the establishment of a young adult ministry. Inspired by these insights, the church formed a Cross-Generational Connection Team tasked with the strategic planning and execution of the Cross-Generational Connection Supper. This part of my research delves into the meticulous preparations leading up to the event and the dynamics of the supper, held on December 16, 2023, from 4 pm to 8 pm.

Preparation Phase: Building the Foundation

The preparation phase for the Cross-Generational Connection Supper began in earnest on November 16, 2023, marking the start of a detailed and thoughtful planning process by the Cross-Generational Connection Team. With a clear understanding of the unique opportunity, the team set out to address the diverse needs and aspirations voiced by the young adult members of the Abundant Praise Baptist Church. Their primary goal was to create an event that would serve as a platform for cross-generational dialogue and as a catalyst for long-term engagement and inclusivity within the congregation. I observed the planning committee's commitment to this

cause as they reflected a holistic approach, contemplating everything from the event's thematic focus to the practicalities of catering and logistics. They aimed to curate an experience that would be memorable and impactful for participants from all generations, ensuring that the supper would be more than just an event—it would be a stepping stone towards a more connected and inclusive church community.

In pursuit of this goal, the Cross-Generational Connection Team dedicated themselves to a meticulous month-long preparation phase, focusing on every detail that would contribute to the success of the supper. Recognizing the significance of catering to various preferences and dietary needs, the team carefully selected a diverse menu that appealed to all attendees, symbolizing the event's inclusive spirit. Beyond the culinary aspects, significant attention was given to managing the logistics of the event, from the layout of the fellowship hall to the scheduling of activities, to ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience for everyone involved. I watched the team come together to create an environment that fostered open and meaningful exchanges across age groups, laying the groundwork for sustained engagement within the church community. By taking these comprehensive steps, the Cross-Generational Connection Team aimed to design an event that resonated deeply with attendees, encouraging continued dialogue and strengthening the bonds within the Abundant Praise Baptist Church.

Event Day: Fostering Unity and Understanding

The Cross-Generational Connection Supper, held on December 16, 2023, at Abundant Praise Baptist Church, was pivotal in fostering community spirit and understanding across different generations. As the fellowship hall buzzed with anticipation, the carefully structured four-hour event kicked off with an informal meet-and-greet session, setting the stage for a night of meaningful engagement. This initial phase was designed as an icebreaker and a foundational

step in building connections among the 21 attendees (Boomers, Gen X'ers, and emerging adults) who brought the diverse perspectives and experiences of the church's broad demographic. By encouraging participants to mingle in a laid-back environment, the organizers effectively lowered social barriers, allowing individuals to feel more comfortable and open to the conversations that lay ahead. This approach proved to be instrumental in knitting together a tapestry of community members, ready to engage in more profound, more impactful dialogues.

Following the meet-and-greet, the atmosphere in the fellowship hall appeared warm and friendly. As I observed the interactions among the people, attendees seemed to feel more acquainted and at ease with one another. This initial interaction was crucial in humanizing the participants, transforming them from mere attendees to active contributors to the evening's discussions. By facilitating this initial bonding, the supper organizers ensured that the following dialogue would be rooted in mutual respect and understanding. As people from different walks of life shared stories and laughter, a sense of unity began to emerge, highlighting the event's success in bridging generational gaps. This early phase of the event set a positive tone and demonstrated the power of simple, human connections in fostering a community that values every member's voice and experience.

Interactive Workshops and Dialogues: Deepening Connections

After the warmth of the initial ice-breaking activities, the Cross-Generational Connection Supper seamlessly moved into its core phase of interactive workshops and small group discussions, aiming to delve deeper into the insights that surfaced during the focus group. This transition marked a shift from casual introductions to more substantive, theme-based dialogues, with the workshops thoughtfully designed to address specific areas such as fostering a supportive community, the pivotal role of dual mentorship, and the enhancement of inclusivity and diversity

within the church's leadership. Each session, spearheaded by a well-prepared member of the Cross-Generational Connection Team, was structured to disseminate information and, more importantly, facilitate a two-way exchange of ideas and experiences. The facilitators' roles were crucial in navigating these discussions, ensuring that the dialogue remained inclusive and that every participant felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, reinforcing the supper's objective of building meaningful connections across generations.

The focus on creating a supportive community was the first to take center stage, encouraging participants to explore what this concept means in the context of their church and how it can be manifested in their daily interactions. Discussions revolved around practical steps for nurturing a sense of belonging and support among church members, with ideas ranging from establishing young adult ministry and more small group gatherings to enhancing communication channels that keep the congregation connected. Participants shared personal stories of times when the church had been a source of support and moments when they felt there was room for improvement. These candid conversations illuminated the diverse expectations and experiences within the congregation, providing valuable insights into how the church can evolve to meet the needs of its members more effectively.

As the workshops progressed, the significance of mentorship emerged as a theme resonating strongly with many attendees, particularly the younger adults seeking guidance beyond spiritual matters. The discussions highlighted a mutual desire for mentorship programs that address personal and professional development, suggesting a more structured approach to pairing younger members with seasoned mentors. This led to an enthusiastic exchange of ideas on implementing such programs, including dual mentorship training for potential mentors and setting up formal channels for mentees to seek guidance. Likewise, the conversation on

inclusivity and diversity in leadership also opened up a broader dialogue about representation within the church's decision-making bodies. Suggestions for promoting diversity included transparent selection processes for leadership roles and providing leadership training for young adults from diverse backgrounds. These discussions underscored Abundant Praise's commitment to creating a more inclusive, and supportive environment for all its members, laying a foundation for continued growth and engagement within the Abundant Praise Baptist Church.

Reflection and Forward Planning: Envisioning the Future

The successful execution and positive reception of the Cross-Generational Connection Supper at Abundant Praise Baptist Church have sparked a new initiative aimed at extending the reach of this transformative community engagement model to the broader Silverleaf community. Inspired by the significant impact of the supper in promoting generational understanding and fostering deep connections within the church community, the congregation is now motivated to replicate this success in a broader context. This planned event for Silverleaf, hosted by the Cross-Generational Connection Team, represents an exciting opportunity to bridge community divides, encourage dialogue, and build relationships beyond the church's immediate membership. By focusing on the same principles of fellowship, mutual support, and inclusivity that made the initial supper a success, the team hopes to facilitate meaningful interactions among Silverleaf's residents, thereby strengthening the fabric of the broader community.

The initiative to organize a Cross-Generational Connection Supper in Silverleaf is driven by the desire to address the community's unique challenges through collaborative and inclusive efforts. Recognizing the power of shared meals and conversation in creating bonds among individuals of different generations and backgrounds, the Cross-Generational Connection Team is eager to leverage this approach to impact the wider Durham area positively. This upcoming

event is seen as an extension of the church's ministry into the community and a vital step towards building a more cohesive, understanding, and supportive local environment. By inviting residents of Silverleaf to participate in this experience, the Abundant Praise Baptist Church aims to foster a sense of belonging and community spirit that transcends traditional boundaries, paving the way for continued collaboration and mutual support among all members of the Durham community.

A Milestone Toward Cross-generational Unity and Inclusivity

The Cross-Generational Connection Supper at Abundant Praise Baptist Church celebrated the coming together of different ages within the church community. It highlighted the essential role of such gatherings in breaking down generational barriers. The event underscored the importance of creating spaces where open dialogue, mutual respect, and collective action can flourish, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive church environment. The positive outcomes of this initiative reflect a broader trend toward embracing diversity and fostering understanding across generations. As the church reflects on the success of the supper, it becomes clear that the insights gained and the relationships established during the event are invaluable assets. These will guide the Abundant Praise Baptist Church in fine-tuning its strategies for engaging with and empowering its members, ensuring that initiatives are responsive to the needs and aspirations of its diverse congregation.

Looking ahead, the Cross-Generational Connection Supper sets a promising precedent for Abundant Praise Baptist Church and other communities seeking to bridge gaps between generations. The initiative's success demonstrates the potential for similar gatherings to serve as catalysts for change, promoting unity and inclusivity across diverse demographic groups. As the Abundant Praise members continue leveraging the lessons learned from this event, it is poised to

enhance its ministry and outreach efforts significantly. The Cross-Generational Connection Team's pioneering approach to fostering intergenerational dialogue and collaboration offers a model that other communities can adapt to their unique contexts. This initiative enriches the church's community life and signals a shift towards more inclusive practices that can inspire and influence broader societal efforts to achieve unity and inclusivity across generations.

Recommendations for The Abundant Praise Baptist Church

In recent discussions with participants after the Abundant Praise Baptist Church Cross-Generational Connection Supper, qualitative data points were gathered through feedback form, which reflected their preferences, needs, and suggestions for deeper engagement within the church community's young adult population. Listed below is what the Cross-Generational Connection Supper revealed about the critical areas for development: community engagement, mentorship, and inclusive leadership with the young adult ministry.

1. **Community Engagement:** The data underscores a pronounced desire among young adults for a sense of belonging that transcends mere service attendance. They yearn for genuine connections that weave into the fabric of their personal lives, extending beyond the confines of religious activities. This demographic also highlights the importance of a robust support system to navigate life's challenges. To address these needs, Abundant Praise Baptist Church could initiate small group gatherings that focus on various life stages and interests, encouraging personal interactions and the formation of a dependable community network.
2. **Mentorship:** There is a palpable interest in mentorship programs that offer career and personal guidance alongside spiritual support. The concept of two-way mentorship, encompassing regular check-ins and advice on professional development, is particularly appealing. It suggests a framework that acknowledges African American young adults' unique hurdles. Implementing a structured mentorship program that pairs young adults with experienced professionals within the congregation could facilitate meaningful growth and support, catering to both spiritual and secular aspirations.
3. **Inclusivity and Leadership:** The call for leadership that mirrors the community's diversity is loud and clear. Such representation can make the church environment more relatable and inviting. Furthermore, young adults advocate for the church's active engagement in social issues, reflecting a broader understanding and involvement in community concerns. Empowering young adults to assume leadership roles signifies a

readiness to invigorate the church's mission with fresh perspectives and energy. To this end, leadership training programs and forums for discussing social issues could be valuable additions, enhancing inclusivity and leadership development.

4. **Young Adult Ministry:** The absence of a ministry specifically tailored to young adults is acutely felt. Establishing such a ministry is seen as a vital step towards bridging this gap, promising to boost engagement levels significantly. A young adult ministry could serve as a dynamic platform for spiritual growth, social connection, and community impact. Organizing events, workshops, and service projects that resonate with the interests and concerns of young adults would be instrumental in achieving this vision.

Through our open dialogue at the Cross-Generational Connection Supper, I connected some significant dots that some senior leaders in congregations miss due to a traditional lens: the need for a cross-generational approach to ministry. To foster continued intergenerational connections, Abundant Praise must intentionally organize activities and events that bring together older members and young adults. Establishing mentorship programs where older members can guide and support young adults in their faith journey will be instrumental in bridging the gap. Additionally, Abundant Praise should encourage young adults to participate in leadership development programs, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to perform and take on leadership roles within the church.

Conclusion

The insights gleaned from Abundant Praise Baptist Church's young adult congregation illuminate a path toward a more engaging and supportive community. By prioritizing areas such as Community Engagement, Mentorship, Inclusivity and Leadership, and Young Adult Ministry, the church can embark on a strategic journey to foster an environment where young adults feel valued and understood and are empowered to contribute to their community's vibrancy and resilience. Through targeted surveys, focus groups, and feedback mechanisms, the church can continue refining its approach, ensuring that the programs and initiatives developed are impactful and reflective of the young adult's evolving needs. In doing so, Abundant Praise Baptist Church

will enrich the lives of its young adult members and strengthen its role as a pivotal pillar of community support and spiritual growth.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand that ministering to the congregation's spiritual needs represents just one aspect of the broader mission. It is crucial to recognize that addressing the congregation's spiritual needs is only part of the mission. Equally important is the restoration of the Black Church's prophetic voice, which plays a pivotal role in confronting and addressing the societal challenges and injustices faced by the African American community. The leadership team and the congregation must create an inclusive and engaging worship environment for all generations. If Abundant Praise wants young adults to feel seen and valued during this sacred time of connection with God, seeking ways to engage young adults is a necessary step in the right direction.

As the Abundant Praise Baptist Church congregation embarks on this transformative journey, we must remember that change takes time and effort. We must be patient and committed to continuously evaluating and adapting church strategies to meet young adult's evolving needs and preferences. Abundant Praise's ultimate goal is to create a vibrant and inclusive environment where young adults can find connection, empowerment, and a deepening relationship with God. Likewise, I firmly believe that the congregation can create a church that authentically and relevantly engages young adults by embracing a cross-generational approach to ministry, guided by the discoveries from the open dialogue. Cross-generational visibility and representation within the church community are crucial for the growth and impact of our ministry.

Bibliography

Amidei, Kathie, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto. *Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating, & Serving Faithfully*. LifelongFaith Associates. Kindle Edition.

Argue, Steven, C. "Empathy with Emerging Generation as a Foundation for Ministry." *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2020): 110–129 DOI: 10.1177/0739891319899666. journals.sagepub.com/home/cej

Carson, Donald A. "Generational Conflict in Ministry." *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (August 2011): 180–82. <https://search-ebshost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIb8W160523000927&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Cormode, Scott. *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World*. Baker Publishing Group, 2020. E-book.

"ETD | Engaging Black Young Adults Ages 25-35 in Spiritual Formation and Leadership | ID: M039k602w | Emory Theses and Dissertations." Accessed August 16, 2023. <https://etd.library.emory.edu/concern/etds/m039k602w?locale=en>.

Eikenberry, David A. "Developing an Intentional and Transparent Intergenerational Ministry in a Small Congregation." Accessed August 16, 2023. <https://core.ac.uk/download/568250057.pdf>.

Erlacher, Jolene. *Young Adults in Ministry*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2014. E-book.

Gunning Francis, Leah. *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community*. Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2015. Kindle.

Holmes, Barbara A. *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*. Fortress Press, 2020. Kindle edition.

Jakes, T. D. *Disruptive Thinking: A Daring Strategy to Change How We Live, Lead, and Love*. New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2023. E-book.

Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. Baker Publishing Group, 2011. E-book.

Johnson, Raymond M. "Cross-Generational Fellowship and the Gospel of Jesus Christ." *The Journal of Discipleship & Family Ministry* 3, no. 2 (2013): 86–88. <https://search-ebshost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3823672&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

McIntosh, Gary. 2002. *One Church, Four Generations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Mitchell, Joshua. 2018. *Black Millennials & the Church*. Valley Forge: Judson Press.

Morton, Nelle. *The Journey Is Home*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

Parker, Brianna. *I Still Believe in the Black Church: Using Data to Decode the Promise and Pain of the Black Church*. Kindle Edition. Mansfield, Texas: Black Millennial Café, 2021.

Parker, Brianna. *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Young Adults in the Tech Age*. Black Millennial Cafe, LLC.

Pomroy, Grace Duddy. "Stewardship: What the Church Can Learn from Millennials." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no.2 (April 2018)

Pinn, Anne, and Anthony Pinn. 2002. *Black Church History*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress

Reyes, Patrick B.. *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

Shaw, Haydn. *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Young Adults Aren't the Problem, and the Future Is Bright*. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015. E-book.

Shettler, Walter Robert. "Generational Ministry in the Twenty-First Century: Rethinking the Experience. Five Transitions for the Church in the Twenty-First Century." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2000. Print.

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Kindle edition.

Wayne E. Croft Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020), chap. 1, Kindle edition.

Walker, Mel. *Inter-Generational Youth Ministry: Why a Balanced View of Connecting the Generations is Essential for the Church*. Chinchilla, PA: Vision for Youth Publishing, December 2013.

Warnock. 2014. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*. New York: New York University Press.

Williams, Theron. *Black Church White Theology: How White Evangelicalism Controls the Black Church*. Church Digest Books. Kindle Edition.

Windle, Benjamin. 2019. *8 Innovations to Leading Millennials*. Cheadle: The Thrive Co.