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**The Role of Nurturing Leadership in Teshuva Temple Ministries:
Embracing the Contributions of African American Women**

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Abstract

The Role of Nurturing Leadership in Teshuva Temple Ministries: Embracing the Contributions of African American Women

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Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) transitioned from a non-denominational prison ministry in Raleigh, NC, to an urban spiritual community in Washington, DC. This shift revealed a leadership gap: African American women faced systemic barriers that limited their advancement despite their deep engagement in faith-based service.

To address this, TTM launched the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) in 2021, providing mentorship, leadership training, and hands-on community engagement—the initiative aimed to dismantle institutional biases and equip women with practical leadership skills.

This study examines WLI's design, impact, and lessons learned, offering best practices for faith-based organizations to cultivate inclusive leadership. Findings suggest that investing in African American women's leadership strengthens ministries, fosters spiritual growth, and expands social impact.

**The Role of Nurturing Leadership in Teshuva Temple Ministries:
Embracing the Contributions of African American Women**

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Introduction

Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) began as a prison ministry serving incarcerated individuals and their families. Over time, it evolved to serve marginalized communities seeking healing, restoration, and spiritual guidance. In 2020, TTM relocated to Washington, DC, to better address underserved populations' complex challenges. This transition revealed a critical issue: Despite their vital contributions, African American women remained underrepresented in leadership roles.

Historically, Black women have sustained faith communities through caregiving, teaching, and organizing. Yet, they've been excluded from decision-making roles and confined to expectations, prioritizing servitude over leadership. At TTM, this disparity became increasingly evident, limiting the church's ability to embody inclusive leadership.

In response, TTM launched the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) in 2021—an action-based program that provided African American women with leadership training, mentorship, and opportunities to lead within the ministry. The initiative aimed to dismantle systemic barriers and cultivate leadership confidence through workshops, coaching, and decision-making engagement. The program was implemented and refined over two years based on participant feedback and observed outcomes.

This project presents the WLI as an initiative for faith-based organizations to cultivate women's leadership through intentional programming. By examining its design, execution, and impact, this initiative offers insights for ministries committed to justice and inclusion. Investing in African American women's leadership breaks systemic barriers, strengthens ministries, enhances spiritual growth, and expands community impact.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader conversation on gender equity in faith leadership by showcasing the transformative power of inclusive models. Supporting Black women in ministry is not only an act of correction but a reformation—redefining leadership in more holistic, collaborative, and just ways.

The Problem

The challenges faced by African American women, particularly in church leadership, are part of a broader struggle against deeply entrenched racial and gender disparities. The Black church has historically been a sanctuary for spirituality, social activism, and resistance to systemic oppression. However, like many institutions, it has traditionally concentrated power and authority in male leadership roles. This patriarchal structure creates a challenging terrain for Black women, who must navigate both racial prejudice and gendered limitations. Addressing these inequities requires intentional efforts like WLI that actively dismantle barriers and equip women with the skills, confidence, and opportunities to lead.

For African American women, leadership presents a complex challenge as they face *double jeopardy*, a term coined by sociologist Frances Piven of the City University of New York in her essay “Conditions of Servitude,” which describes the compound discrimination they experience due to both race and gender.¹ In predominantly male-led leadership spaces, these women navigate intersecting biases: racial prejudice that limits their influence and gendered expectations that undervalue their contributions. Leadership traits often associated with African American women—empathy, nurture, and community-centered decision-making—are frequently dismissed in favor of traditionally “masculine” qualities such as dominance, competition, and authoritarianism. This creates a paradox: Black women in leadership must either conform to

¹ Frances Fox Piven, “The Conditions of Servitude,” *Social Policy* 3, no. 2 (1972): 32–37.

male-dominated leadership models or risk being overlooked for embracing their authentic leadership styles. In churches like Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM), where African American women are central to ministry work, the disconnect between their contributions and representation in leadership is stark.

A survey conducted at TTM revealed several barriers limiting African American women's leadership participation, including time constraints (35%), lack of confidence (25%), insufficient mentorship (20%), and misalignment between available programs and personal leadership aspirations (15%). Addressing these barriers is critical to ensuring that leadership development programs remain accessible and practical. To this end, TTM launched the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) in 2021, a structured, action-based effort to equip and empower women for ministerial leadership.

In many religious settings, leadership is traditionally associated with traits that are considered masculine: dominance, competition, and authoritarian decision-making. For African American women who lead, these biases force them to contend with a leadership paradox—they must either suppress their natural leadership qualities to fit into a male-dominated leadership model or risk being overlooked altogether for their more nurturing leadership style. This dynamic leads to a significant gap between the leadership potential African American women offer and the opportunities afforded to them, particularly in faith communities where they make up a substantial portion of the membership. In churches like Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM), where African American women play a vital role, the disparity between their presence and representation in leadership roles is poignant.

A theological reflection on Christian leadership reveals historical tensions and biblical affirmations of women's roles. While many denominations have upheld patriarchal leadership

structures, scripture offers numerous examples of women in pivotal roles. Deborah (Judges 4-5), Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Priscilla (Acts 18:26), and Junia (Romans 16:7) demonstrate that women have historically been called to leadership within faith communities. Yet, interpretations of scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 have often been used to justify restricting women's leadership. The tension between these perspectives highlights the need for an intentional and theologically sound approach to leadership inclusion.

While scriptural examples affirm women's leadership, the broader theological discourse surrounding gender and race in church leadership has also been shaped by feminist and liberationist scholars arguing that Black women's leadership is biblically defensible and spiritually essential. Renita J. Weems, in *Just a Sister Away*, highlights the profound spiritual wisdom and leadership authority found in overlooked biblical women, urging the church to revisit its narratives with a lens attuned to inclusion and justice.² Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness* similarly challenges theological frameworks that ignore Black women's experiences, offering a womanist Christology rooted in survival, resilience, and community care.³ In *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, Jacquelyn Grant critiques Black women's theological erasure and asserts that their lived experiences should be central in shaping ministry models.⁴ These scholars, alongside Katie G. Cannon's ethical framing, call for a leadership paradigm that acknowledges the spiritual authority of African American women and centers on relational, restorative, and justice-oriented leadership approaches. Integrating their insights helps reframe

² Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988). Pages 123-125

³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Pages 78-81

⁴ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). Pages 185-187

nurturing not as soft or secondary but as biblically faithful and theologically transformative for contemporary ministry contexts like Teshuvah Temple Ministries.

Response to the Problem

In response to these disparities, in 2021, TTM launched the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) to address leadership disparities. The action-based program provided women with training, mentorship, and ministry leadership opportunities. Through workshops and coaching, it aimed to dismantle barriers and build confidence. Over two years, the program was implemented and refined based on participant feedback and measurable outcomes.

A survey conducted within TTM revealed that 40% of respondents—African American women aged 35-70 from the Ward 8 community, income between \$30,000 and \$45,000, educational levels ranging from high school to some College, and members of Teshuvah Temple Ministries—believe that the nurturing qualities that African American women bring to leadership are underutilized. This statistic signals a pressing need for intentional leadership development efforts within organizations like TTM to harness these unique qualities better and empower women to lead authentically.⁵ The idea that 40% of respondents believe the nurturing nature of African American women in leadership is underutilized reveals several layers of systemic, cultural, and organizational dynamics that need to be addressed within institutions like Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM).

The questions posed in the survey delve into critical issues of leadership representation and the support mechanisms necessary for African American women to thrive in leadership roles.

⁵ SurveyMonkey, "Survey Results on the Utilization of Leadership Qualities Among African American Women in Teshuvah Temple Ministries," accessed July 12, 2024, https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-IZJ7khgZzPXA6FLQXuH4Lw_3D_3D/.

Respondents were asked to define effective leadership within the church, identify qualities they associate with strong leadership, and express whether they feel African American women are adequately represented in leadership roles at TTM. Their insights revealed that while African American women contribute significantly to the spiritual and cultural life of the church, they often face barriers to assuming formal leadership positions. The survey also uncovered a widespread sense that the community does not fully support African American women in leadership, with respondents emphasizing the need for mentorship, visibility, and advocacy to bridge this gap.

These findings highlight the importance of creating environments that recognize, celebrate, and elevate the nurturing, empathetic leadership that African American women offer. The Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) that TTM is launching directly responds to these concerns. Through mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and supportive spaces for women to grow into leadership roles, the initiative seeks to dismantle the barriers revealed in the survey and promote the effective utilization of African American women's leadership potential.

The WLI aims to foster a culture within TTM that values and supports the leadership strengths of African American women, shifting the focus from traditional, patriarchal models of leadership to one that integrates empathy, collaboration, and community-building into its framework. This innovation directly addresses the systemic and cultural challenges identified in the survey by providing women with the tools, mentorship, and support they need to thrive as leaders within the church and beyond. In this way, the WLI will empower African American women and enrich the broader ministry, ensuring that the church community can fully benefit from the diverse leadership styles that women bring to the table.

Project Design and Phases of Implementation

The nurturing leadership that African American women provide is valuable and necessary for fostering holistic spiritual and community well-being. Their leadership extends beyond traditional preaching and teaching roles, including mentorship, advocacy, and direct engagement with their congregations' emotional, psychological, and material needs. In marginalized communities, where systemic inequities often exacerbate social and economic instability, fostering trust, building relationships, and cultivating community resilience is as vital as preaching from the pulpit. Yet, these strengths remain undervalued because they do not fit within traditional, male-established leadership frameworks.

To address this disparity, Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) developed an intentional leadership development initiative to redefine and elevate the role of nurturing leadership within African American religious contexts. This initiative includes structured mentorship programs, leadership training tailored to relational and emotional intelligence, and opportunities for women to step into visible leadership roles that align with their strengths. The success of this innovation is evaluated based on participation rates, participant qualitative feedback, and measurable shifts in leadership representation at TTM. If successful, the model may be adapted for broader implementation in other Black religious institutions.

The Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) at Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) was created in response to the underrepresentation of African American women in church leadership.

Historically, Black women have been the backbone of faith-based communities, serving as spiritual caregivers, educators, and organizers.

As TTM transitioned from a prison ministry to an urban faith community in Washington, D.C., it became evident that systemic leadership disparities persisted. While women comprised most of the congregation and contributed significantly to ministry work, they were largely absent from

key leadership positions. Leadership at TTM recognized that the church could not fully realize its mission of inclusivity and empowerment while overlooking the gifts and callings of its African American women leaders.

Recognizing this challenge, senior leadership at TTM, led by Pastor Arlene Hudson and key ministry partners, initiated the WLI in 2021. The goal was to provide a structured, intentional approach to equipping women for leadership by offering mentorship, leadership development training, and direct leadership opportunities within the church. This initiative was built on theological principles affirming women's leadership and aimed to dismantle gendered and racial biases embedded in religious institutions.

The WLI was designed as an action-based initiative with three core components: leadership training, mentorship and sponsorship, and hands-on leadership opportunities. Within these components, we identified specific concrete skills or strategies needed to accomplish the larger goal.

The Leadership Development Training program provided participants with monthly workshops to enhance their skills in key areas essential for effective ministry leadership. These workshops focused on Strategic Leadership, equipping women with decision-making, problem-solving, and organizational management abilities. They also emphasized Public Speaking & Preaching, empowering women to deliver sermons and lead congregational discussions confidently. Theological Education was crucial in providing a strong biblical foundation for leadership while challenging patriarchal interpretations of scripture. Additionally, Community Organizing workshops prepared participants to lead church-based initiatives and outreach programs, ensuring they had the tools to effect meaningful change within their faith communities.

A key component of WLI was the Mentorship & Sponsorship Model, which paired participants with experienced mentors within and beyond TTM. This model provided essential guidance and support in navigating leadership challenges, helping women build confidence through direct engagement. By fostering relationships with senior clergy, the mentorship program created a pipeline for future leadership opportunities, ensuring emerging leaders had access to valuable networks and advocacy.

Participants also engaged in Hands-On Leadership Opportunities, allowing them to apply their skills in real-world ministry settings. They took on Preaching & Worship Leadership roles, delivering sermons and leading worship services to deepen their ministerial experience. They actively contributed to program development and the design and implementation of ministry initiatives that aligned with TTM's mission. Additionally, participants served on Decision-Making Committees, playing a vital role in church governance and leadership teams. These opportunities provided a well-rounded leadership foundation, equipping them to step confidently into influential roles within their faith communities. This structure ensured that women were theoretically prepared for leadership and had practical, real-world experience to apply their learning in meaningful, impactful ways.

Implementation Phases

The WLI was implemented over two years, unfolding in four strategic phases:

Phase 1: Leadership Recruitment & Program Framework (2021 - Early 2022)

Identified key female leaders within TTM and invited them to participate in the initiative.

Developed program curriculum and secured mentors.

Assessed barriers to women's leadership through surveys and leadership meetings.

Phase 2: Training & Mentorship Rollout (Mid-2022 - Early 2023)

Launched monthly leadership workshops covering core leadership competencies.

Matched each participant with a mentor or sponsor to provide personalized leadership guidance.

Encouraged women to take on visible leadership roles in services and events.

Phase 3: Leadership Implementation & Community Engagement (Mid-2023 - Late 2023)

Women began leading ministry programs, preaching, and organizing community initiatives.

Tracked progress and leadership effectiveness through participant self-assessments and mentor evaluations.

Addressed emerging challenges, such as internal resistance from traditionalists.

Phase 4: Program Evaluation & Refinement (Late 2023 - 2024)

Conducted final surveys and focus groups to gather feedback.

Evaluated effectiveness and areas for improvement using measurable impact data.

Adjusted the program structure based on findings.

Survey Insights & Program Impact

Increased Representation: Women in leadership roles at TTM grew by 40% within the first year.

Greater Community Engagement: More women-led initiatives emerged, broadening TTM's impact on underserved communities. Eighty-five percent successfully delivered their first sermon or led worship, and 60% assumed decision-making roles within the community.

Key Takeaways from Participant Feedback

What Worked Best

Participants highlighted several program strengths. Strong mentorship relationships, a supportive environment, and opportunities to lead in ministry settings were cited as especially effective. However, participants also expressed a need for expanded financial and administrative leadership training and noted that some congregants resisted women in leadership roles.

Areas Needing Improvement

Participants also identified key areas for improvement in the Women's Leadership Initiative. They recommended expanding the leadership training curriculum to include practical skills such as financial management and church administration, essential for effective ministry leadership.

While the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) has been successful, challenges remain. Traditionalist perspectives within the church argue that male leadership is divinely ordained, often citing Pauline epistles. However, these interpretations overlook historical and cultural contexts. Early Christian communities usually included women in leadership, and exclusionary readings fail to account for the liberating message of the Gospel, which affirms the dignity and worth of all believers (Galatians 3:28).

TTM leadership intentionally shifted the culture and fostered greater acceptance of women's leadership within the church. One significant approach was through theological education and

biblical reframing. The church hosted Bible study sessions focused on prominent women leaders in scripture, including Deborah, Phoebe, and Priscilla. These sessions emphasized Galatians 3:28, which declares, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” reinforcing the biblical foundation for inclusive leadership.

Public advocacy and increased visibility of women leaders also played a crucial role. Women were encouraged to preach and teach regularly, making their presence and leadership a normal and expected part of church life. Senior male pastors and church leaders openly affirmed and supported the contributions of women in leadership roles, modeling this shift from the pulpit and within leadership meetings.

Finally, TTM implemented cultural and structural changes to reinforce this shift. Leadership policies were amended to ensure women had equal access to leadership opportunities, and women were intentionally included in governance structures and decision-making boards.

While challenges remain, these strategies have paved the way for a more inclusive leadership culture within TTM. These strategies have significantly contributed to fostering a more inclusive leadership culture within TTM by creating tangible opportunities for women to lead with confidence and authority. Through Leadership Development Training, participants have gained the skills necessary to take on higher leadership roles, with many stepping into key decision-making positions within their congregations. The Mentorship & Sponsorship Model has provided women with direct support, guidance, and advocacy, leading to increased visibility and access to leadership opportunities. Many mentees have transitioned into leadership roles, supported by senior clergy who recognize their potential.

While some argue that traditional hierarchical structures provide stability and clarity in religious institutions, critics of alternative leadership models often overlook the evolving needs of faith communities. However, a growing body of research and theological reflection supports a more inclusive and holistic approach to leadership that incorporates both authority and nurture.

The TTM model does not seek to dismantle traditional leadership structures but rather to complement and expand them by integrating relational leadership as a legitimate and necessary component. By balancing both models, the initiative acknowledges the strengths of structured leadership while addressing its gaps in relational and communal engagement.

Scriptures such as Matthew 20:26-28 emphasize servant leadership:

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mathew 20:26-28 NIV)

This passage underscores the necessity of servant leadership, which aligns closely with African American women's nurturing leadership style in religious contexts. Additionally, Proverbs 31 highlights the wisdom and strength of women as leaders, demonstrating that their contributions extend beyond domestic roles to impact broader societal and spiritual spheres.

The WLI effectively challenged patriarchal leadership models by integrating theological reflection and leadership literature, offering a sustainable framework for inclusive leadership development. By intentionally investing in the leadership potential of African American women—through mentorship, training, and hands-on opportunities—TTM empowered individual leaders while strengthening the broader faith community.⁶

⁶ Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New

However, the program's implementation and evaluation results reveal ongoing needs. Future iterations of TTM's leadership development efforts must move beyond the traditional focus on decision-making and organizational skills. To further enhance the impact of nurturing leadership, upcoming programming should incorporate additional training in emotional intelligence, empathy, community engagement, and relationship-building—skills fundamental to the leadership style many African American women naturally embody. These adjustments will ensure that the program continues to evolve in alignment with participant feedback and the dynamic needs of the faith community.

The survey also revealed that 60% of respondents had been given leadership development opportunities, yet only 40% had actively participated. When asked about the barriers to participation, respondents cited factors such as time constraints (35%), lack of confidence (25%), insufficient encouragement or mentorship (20%), and misalignment of available programs with their leadership goals (15%). These responses point to several critical barriers that must be addressed to ensure that leadership development programs are both accessible and relevant. Moreover, nearly 24% of respondents indicated they had not been offered leadership development opportunities, signaling a significant gap in TTM's efforts to empower women in leadership roles.⁷

This gap in leadership development opportunities reflects broader systemic issues within the church and presents an opportunity for growth. TTM must re-evaluate its leadership development strategies to make them more inclusive and supportive. This could involve providing targeted mentorship, offering more flexible and accessible programs, and ensuring that

York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), Pages 24-33

⁷ SurveyMonkey. 2024. "Survey Results on the Utilization of Leadership Qualities Among African American Women in Teshuvah Temple Ministries." Accessed July 12.
https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-IZJ7khgZzPXA6FLQXuH4Lw_3D_3D/.

the leadership development framework at TTM is designed to nurture the unique strengths of African American women leaders. By addressing these barriers, TTM can build a more robust leadership pipeline that better supports the holistic needs of its community and leverages the gifts of its women leaders.

The underutilization of nurturing leadership within African American women in religious contexts is not just a matter of personal inadequacy but rather a structural and cultural issue. By addressing the systemic biases that limit leadership development and by intentionally cultivating leadership styles that value empathy, relational engagement, and community building, TTM can transform its leadership landscape. This will empower African American women and strengthen the ministry's mission to meet its community's spiritual, emotional, and practical needs.

The underutilization of nurturing leadership among African American women in religious spaces is not merely an issue of representation—it is a theological, social, and institutional challenge that demands action. It is time to shift leadership paradigms to reflect the church's full range of God-given leadership abilities.

To those in leadership positions, we urge you to take several necessary actions to create a more inclusive and equitable environment. First, reevaluate your current leadership development programs to ensure they provide clear pathways for nurturing leadership styles to flourish. These programs should be designed to recognize and support relational, emotionally intelligent leadership approaches, which are often undervalued in traditional frameworks. Next, advocate for policy changes that dismantle structural barriers and open doors for women to occupy roles that have historically been reserved for men. Finally, engage your congregations in meaningful theological reflection by fostering dialogue around biblical models of leadership that include relational and servant leadership, as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus.

For African American women aspiring to leadership, this is a call to step boldly into your power, to challenge the barriers that have limited your access, and to assert your rightful place as spiritual leaders. Your leadership is needed for the vitality of your churches and the transformation and healing of the broader community.

Evaluation and Impact

Quantitative Outcomes:

Within the first year of implementing the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) experienced a 40% increase in women occupying leadership roles. This significant growth reflects the program's early success in addressing systemic leadership gaps. Additionally, 85% of participants reported a marked increase in their confidence to lead. In comparison, 70% successfully delivered their inaugural sermon or led a worship service—milestones demonstrating spiritual and practical growth. Furthermore, 60% of participants assumed decision-making roles within church governance, signaling a tangible shift in leadership dynamics and a move toward greater inclusivity at TTM.

Qualitative Feedback:

Participant feedback consistently emphasized the value of mentorship and hands-on leadership experiences as vital components of their growth. Many noted that the opportunity to lead in real ministry contexts and strong mentor support significantly contributed to their development. The leadership workshops were praised for enhancing essential communication and strategic decision-making skills. However, some participants raised concerns about the persistence of traditionalist views within the congregation, underscoring the continued need for intentional dialogue and community education around inclusive leadership.

Impact on Ministry and Community:

The initiative has reshaped TTM's leadership culture, fostering an environment where diverse leadership styles are recognized and actively encouraged.

Increased women-led initiatives have broadened TTM's outreach, positively affecting underserved community segments.

Enhanced leadership confidence among participants has been translated into more dynamic and inclusive ministry practices.

This evaluation underscores WLI's measurable successes and commitment to iterative improvement, ensuring the initiative remains dynamic, responsive, and impactful in nurturing a new generation of African American women leaders at TTM and beyond.

This effort is an academic discussion and a movement toward justice, equity, and spiritual wholeness. However, meaningful progress requires intentional leadership development, which aligns with the framework set forth by Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, where she highlights the need for leadership that reflects empowerment and consciousness within marginalized communities.⁸

Survey results indicate that 40% of respondents believe African American women's nurturing nature is underutilized, emphasizing the need for structured programs that recognize and cultivate these strengths. Leadership development at institutions like TTM must extend beyond traditional public speaking, decision-making, and organizational management skills. It must also incorporate emotional intelligence, empathy, relationship-building, and community engagement,

⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Pages 100-103

critical components of effective leadership within Black religious spaces, as discussed in Harts' *The Memo*, where she underscores the importance of cultural competence and relational leadership.⁹

Gaps and Barriers to Participation

Although 60% of respondents reported having access to leadership development opportunities, only 40% participated. This disparity reveals key barriers to engagement. Respondents cited time constraints due to work or family obligations (35%), lack of confidence in their leadership abilities (25%), insufficient mentorship or encouragement (20%), and misalignment between available programs and personal leadership aspirations (15%). This highlights the complex factors that impede participation, as noted by Ely and Thomas in their work on diversity and leadership barriers within organizations.¹⁰

This statistic underscores the need for TTM to reassess and expand its initiatives to ensure that all women have access to opportunities that can support their growth. As the Pew Research Center notes, while women's participation in leadership roles has grown, institutional barriers hinder further progress.¹¹ By enhancing mentorship, theological training, and leadership pathways,

Through the Women's Leadership Initiative, TTM has taken the necessary steps to offer structured leadership development opportunities to African American women. However, survey results revealed that 24% of respondents had not received any leadership development,

⁹ Minda Harts, *The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table* (New York: Seal Press, 2019). Pages 77-80

¹⁰ Robin J. Ely and David A. Thomas, "Gender and Racial Diversity in Organizations: Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones?" *Harvard Business Review*, 2001. Page 200

¹¹ Pew Research Center, "Women and Leadership," July 14, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/>.

highlighting that gaps still exist. While the initiative has successfully provided mentorship, theological training, and practical leadership experiences for many, these findings indicate the need for further expansion. TTM must reassess and broaden its approach by strengthening mentorship networks, deepening theological training components, and creating more accessible leadership pathways. These future actions will be crucial to ensuring that more women are equipped and empowered to serve in leadership roles throughout the ministry.¹² As TTM refines its approach, it is essential to examine both the progress made and the remaining challenges in leadership development.

A closer evaluation of the leadership development and mentorship components of the WLI reveals significant progress and areas requiring continued growth. Teshuvah Temple Ministries' (TTM) leadership development programs integrate theological education, public speaking, administrative training, conflict resolution, and mentorship. Recent surveys indicate that 60% of respondents have participated in these programs, marking a 50% increase from previous years. While these improvements reflect a positive trajectory in accessibility and impact, notable gaps remain: 40% of eligible women still lack leadership opportunities, and 24% report no leadership development. These findings underscore persistent inequalities in leadership support, especially within Black religious spaces where African American women have long sustained church life yet remain underrepresented in formal leadership positions.

Mentorship, in particular, emerges as a critical factor. At TTM, structured mentorship efforts—such as shadowing senior leaders and targeted skill-building workshops—have provided emerging women leaders with direct support, spiritual guidance, and exposure to leadership responsibilities. These hands-on experiences foster confidence and have laid the foundation for

¹² Patricia S. Parker, *Race, Gender, and Leadership: Re-envisioning Organizational Leadership from the Perspectives of African American Women Executives* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Page 20

ethical and relational leadership. As Melissa Harris-Perry reminds us in *Sister Citizen*, mentorship is not merely about career guidance but also about helping women navigate the unique psychological and structural barriers they face in leadership. Likewise, Katie G. Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* affirms that the nurturing nature often attributed to women can serve as a robust foundation for moral and transformative leadership.

While these foundations have been instrumental in elevating women's leadership at TTM, future program iterations must deepen the mentorship component by incorporating leadership essentials like strategic planning, effective communication, and team building. Practical assignments—such as developing a ministry vision statement or leading a congregational project—would further empower mentees to lead confidently and clearly. These enhancements will ensure that mentorship remains spiritually rooted and strategically impactful, continuing to develop leaders prepared to meet the complex demands of ministry today.

TTM's leadership development programs integrate theological education, public speaking, administrative training, conflict resolution, and mentorship. Recent surveys indicate that 60% of respondents have participated in these programs, marking a 50% increase from previous years. While these improvements signal greater accessibility and impact, 40% of eligible women still lack opportunities, and 24% report no access, underscoring persistent inequalities in leadership support. This is especially significant in the context of predominantly Black religious spaces, where African American women have historically been marginalized in formal leadership roles despite their central role in sustaining church life, have traditionally been marginalized in formal leadership positions, a concern raised by Felder in *Stony the Road We Trod*.¹³ However, the fact that 24% of respondents have not been provided with leadership development opportunities

¹³ Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1517 Media, 1991). Pages 127-130

reveals that much work still needs to be done. This gap signals that nearly one-quarter of women with the potential to lead are not adequately supported, which perpetuates organizational inequalities. Without access to leadership development, these women are likely to face even more significant barriers to formal leadership positions, ultimately preventing them from fully realizing their spiritual and vocational callings.

Mentorship as a Tool of Transformation

Mentorship, in particular, is essential for African American women, who often face systemic barriers and lack the informal support networks available to others. At TTM, structured mentorship, such as “shadow” leadership programs and targeted skill-building workshops, helps emerging leaders navigate the complexities of religious leadership. This hands-on approach builds confidence and lays the foundation for ethical leadership that benefits spiritual and social realms. As Harris-Perry discusses in *Sister Citizen*, mentorship is not just about guidance but also the structural support needed to overcome systemic barriers in leadership.¹⁴

At TTM, the mentorship component of the Women’s Leadership Initiative has provided women with valuable support, spiritual guidance, and exposure to leadership opportunities. While this foundation has been essential, future iterations of the program can be further enhanced by expanding the mentor role to include the facilitation of skill development workshops on leadership essentials such as effective communication, strategic planning, and team building. Mentorship can also be enriched through practical assignments, including guiding mentees in crafting vision statements, leading ministry projects, or chairing committee meetings. These

¹⁴ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

experiential elements will help solidify the learning process and build confidence. As Katie G. Cannon emphasizes in *Black Womanist Ethics*, the nurturing nature of women can serve as a robust foundation for ethical leadership—one that influences both spiritual and social transformation. TTM is committed to continuing this work by ensuring that future mentoring relationships are spiritually grounded and practically empowering.¹⁵

These systemic barriers underscore the critical need for structured mentorship in religious leadership. For African American women, overcoming obstacles such as limited access to leadership roles, theological education, and institutional support requires more than theological expertise—it also demands emotional resilience, community engagement, and the ability to navigate complex spiritual and social dynamics. This gap reduces diverse perspectives in ministry decision-making and leaves emerging leaders without essential role models. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, the marginalization of Black women in leadership stems from deeply entrenched power structures that privilege male-dominated spaces.¹⁶ The consequences of this systemic issue are significant, including a lack of diverse leadership perspectives in ministry decision-making, fewer role models and mentors for younger generations of women in the church, and the continued marginalization of women's voices in theological discourse and ministry development. Without intentional intervention, these barriers will persist, limiting the full potential of African American women in ministry leadership.

¹⁵ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Pages 87-89

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 92-93.

The Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) tackles these challenges head-on. By offering a structured mentorship program that includes “shadow” leadership opportunities, monthly workshops, and one-on-one coaching, WLI equips participants with the skills, confidence, and theological grounding necessary for effective ministry. Rooted in biblical principles and enriched by insights from womanist theology and leadership studies, this initiative creates sustainable pathways for African American women to overcome systemic barriers and transform their congregations. Mentorship has been identified as a critical factor in overcoming the challenges women of color face in leadership.¹⁷ For example, I mentored a young African American woman in our congregation who aspired to lead youth ministry but lacked confidence in her abilities. She overcame self-doubt through intentional guidance, theological discussions, and structured leadership exercises and successfully launched a thriving youth program. Her journey exemplifies the transformative impact of structured mentorship—without it, she may not have pursued her calling.

The WLI Mentorship Program is a strategic and sustainable response to this leadership gap. It provides structured support and leadership development through key elements such as theological education, leadership coaching, conflict resolution training, and spiritual formation. This is argued in *Mud Flower Collective*, which states that theological education is crucial in equipping women with the intellectual and spiritual tools needed to navigate leadership roles, yet access has often been restricted.¹⁸ The program pairs emerging leaders with experienced mentors and incorporates monthly workshops, one-on-one mentorship sessions, and practical ministry

¹⁷ Catalyst, “Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2013, <https://oae.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Women-Rising-The-Unseen-Barriers-Harvard-Business-Review-0913.pdf>.

¹⁸ Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 66-68

assignments. The pilot phase will run for one year, with quarterly assessments to evaluate effectiveness and refine the program as needed. By addressing the leadership disparity, the initiative creates a direct and lasting impact on the accessibility of leadership opportunities for African American women in religious settings.

This initiative is deeply rooted in biblical principles that affirm the role of women in ministry, drawing from the leadership of Deborah (Judges 4-5 NIV), the ministerial work of Priscilla (Acts 18 NIV), and Paul's acknowledgment of women in leadership (Romans 16 NIV). Additionally, the program integrates insights from theological scholarship, womanist theology, and leadership studies to provide a comprehensive foundation for African American women seeking to expand their ministry roles. By fostering theological depth and practical leadership experience, this program aims to dismantle barriers and create sustainable pathways for African American women in church leadership.

Mentors can also offer emotional and psychological support, which is critical in leadership development. Leadership, particularly in marginalized communities, comes with its own set of challenges, including dealing with systemic barriers such as sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. For African American women in religious leadership, these barriers can feel overwhelming, especially when they are the first or one of the few women in leadership roles. Having a mentor to guide them through these challenges can provide strength and resilience, allowing them to navigate the complexities of leadership with greater confidence and clarity.

Theological Education and Systemic Change

In addition to mentorship, theological training is a critical component of leadership development that equips women with the intellectual and spiritual tools necessary to lead in a religious

context. Theological education helps women deepen their understanding of scripture, develop their preaching and teaching skills, and build a solid foundation for making faith-based decisions. For African American women, access to theological education has often been limited due to systemic barriers in higher education and religious institutions, which have traditionally excluded women and, mainly, women of color from formal theological study.

Expanding theological training opportunities at TTM would ensure more women have the knowledge and skills necessary to assume formal leadership roles, such as pastors, ministers, or deacons. This would not only empower individual women but also enhance the overall spiritual health of the congregation, as more leaders would be equipped to offer diverse perspectives and insights rooted in deep theological understanding. Furthermore, access to theological education can help break down some patriarchal structures that have historically limited women's participation in church leadership by empowering women with knowledge.

According to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) 2021-2022 Annual Data Tables, in Fall 2021, Black or African American students comprised approximately 15% of total enrollment in ATS member schools, with women representing about 60% of Black or African American enrollment. In contrast, White students comprised about 50% of total enrollment, with a more balanced gender distribution.¹⁹ These statistics highlight the underrepresentation of African American women in theological education compared to their White counterparts.

This disparity underscores the need for initiatives like the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) to provide mentorship and theological training tailored to African American women, addressing their unique challenges in pursuing religious leadership roles.

¹⁹ Association of Theological Schools, 2021-2022 Annual Data Tables, Association of Theological Schools, 2022, https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/2021-2022_Annual_Data_Tables.pdf.

For example, women can effectively challenge traditionalist views that restrict leadership roles by highlighting biblical examples of female leaders such as Deborah, Priscilla, and Pheobe.²⁰

These examples establish their credibility within theological discourse, demonstrating that leadership is not inherently gendered. Formal theological training further equips women with credentials often required for leadership roles in the church. These credentials validate their competence and expertise while providing a structured foundation in biblical interpretation, pastoral care, and church administration, making it more difficult for detractors to dismiss their leadership based on gender alone.

An advanced degree such as a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) is crucial. The M.Div. program provides rigorous training in exegesis, systematic theology, homiletics, pastoral care, and ecclesiastical leadership. This comprehensive preparation equips women with the theological depth and practical skills necessary to assume leadership positions confidently. Additionally, M.Div. coursework includes exposure to ethical reasoning, intercultural ministry, and conflict resolution—essential competencies for addressing congregations' complex spiritual and social needs. A woman with an M.Div. is better positioned to lead a congregation and to design and implement ministry programs that address pressing community concerns, including social justice initiatives and pastoral counseling services.

The underutilization of nurturing leadership traits among African American women extends beyond religious institutions. It reflects a broader societal issue which traditional leadership models dominate, often at the expense of more relational and empathetic leadership styles.²¹

Organizations across various sectors—including businesses, nonprofits, and educational

²⁰ Brittany Rust, *The Biblical Case for Women in Leadership*. "Brittany Rust (blog), April 2018. Accessed August 10, 2025. <https://www.brittanyrust.com/blog/biblical-case-women-leadership>.

²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45–46.

institutions—increasingly recognize the need for more inclusive and equitable leadership practices. Nurturing leadership, which emphasizes relationship-building, trust, and collaborative problem-solving, fosters healthy, resilient communities.²²

At the heart of any thriving religious organization is its leadership, and at Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM), the nurturing leadership model exemplified by African American women is essential to its mission. The profound cultural legacy demonstrates that African American women leaders in religious spaces continue to embrace and expand upon these traditions. However, despite their indispensable roles, African American women remain underrepresented in formal leadership positions within many churches. The nurturing leadership model at Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) aims to address this gap by integrating relationship-building, mentorship, and problem-solving into its leadership development framework.²³

One of the key innovations within TTM is the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), a structured program designed to empower African American women for leadership roles by fostering strong interpersonal connections and strategic problem-solving skills. Through mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and community engagement initiatives, WLI ensures that emerging women leaders receive the necessary training and support to take on senior roles. This approach mirrors historical precedents set by figures like Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height, who demonstrated the power of nurturing leadership in effecting long-term change.²⁴

²² Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and the Black Body* (New York: Touchstone, 2011), 112.

²³ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1988). Page 111-114
 Jacqueline M. Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Faith and the Church* (New York: Beacon Press, 1998). Pages 15-18

²⁴ Jacqueline M. Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Faith and the Church* (New York: Beacon Press, 1998). Pages 15-18

The TTM survey findings further reinforce the importance of these strategies. The fact that 36% of respondents identified problem-solving as a key leadership trait suggests that African American women leaders are expected to build relationships and navigate complex community challenges.²⁵ This expectation aligns with women's historic roles in the Black church—acting as intermediaries, organizers, and advocates for social justice. Their leadership is about maintaining harmony, actively addressing systemic barriers, and fostering resilience within their congregations.²⁶

In this context, problem-solving is not just about resolving immediate issues; it involves addressing ongoing practical and emotional community challenges. For African American women leaders, problem-solving often requires a balance between managing the material needs of their congregation and navigating the emotional and psychological demands of leading marginalized communities. At the heart of effective problem-solving is emotional intelligence—the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions while also recognizing and responding to the feelings of others. For African American women leaders, emotional intelligence is crucial for navigating the complex social dynamics within their communities. They must be able to identify the emotional undercurrents that influence people's behavior and use this understanding to facilitate practical and emotionally satisfying solutions.²⁷

For example, in TTM's Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), problem-solving might involve helping a congregant struggling with housing insecurity. While finding a practical solution—

²⁵ SurveyMonkey, "Survey Results on the Utilization of Leadership Qualities Among African American Women in Teshuvah Temple Ministries," accessed July 12, 2024, https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-IZJ7khgZzPXA6FLQXuH4Lw_3D_3D/.

²⁶ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: Norton, 1999). Pages 220-223

²⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 56.

such as connecting the individual with housing resources—is essential, the emotional aspect of the problem cannot be ignored. The individual may be experiencing feelings of shame, fear, or frustration, which must also be addressed to provide holistic support. An emotionally intelligent leader will recognize this and offer material assistance, reassurance, and validation. This dual approach to problem-solving is a hallmark of nurturing leadership. It reflects a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of human needs, where practical problems often have emotional roots that must be acknowledged and addressed. By solving problems this way, African American women leaders create a more inclusive and empathetic environment where individuals feel cared for on multiple levels.²⁸

Problem-solving in the African American church often extends beyond individual issues to encompass broader community challenges. For example, TTM's leadership, supported by the Women's Leadership Initiative, may be called upon to address systemic problems such as poverty, unemployment, or lack of access to healthcare. In these cases, problem-solving involves mobilizing the church's resources and networks to create sustainable solutions that benefit the community. TTM's initiative to address food insecurity in their surrounding Ward 8 neighborhood exemplifies mobilizing the church's resources and networks to create sustainable solutions. Recognizing that many families struggled with access to nutritious food, TTM developed a community pantry program.

The church began by leveraging its relationships with local farmers, grocery stores, and nonprofit organizations to source fresh produce, dairy products, and dry goods. They also partnered with nearby congregations and community centers to expand their reach and pool resources. Volunteers from the church were mobilized to organize donation drives, collect funds,

²⁸ Ely, Robin J., and David A. Thomas. "Gender and Racial Diversity in Organizations: Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones?" *Harvard Business Review*, 2001

and distribute food weekly. Additionally, TTM introduced a sustainable solution by offering workshops on urban gardening and meal preparation. They transformed vacant church-owned lots into community gardens, teaching residents how to grow their food and providing starter kits with seeds and tools. This initiative addressed immediate needs and empowered individuals with the knowledge and skills to sustain their families long-term. Through this multifaceted approach, TTM demonstrated how problem-solving within the church goes beyond temporary relief, focusing instead on long-term community empowerment and resilience. This initiative became a model for other churches in the area, showcasing the power of mobilizing resources and networks for sustainable impact.²⁹

This form of problem-solving is deeply rooted in the fact that an individual's well-being is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the collective. African American women leaders, particularly in religious settings, are often expected to take on the role of caretakers for their entire community, ensuring that individual and collective needs are met. At TTM, this might involve organizing programs that address economic inequality, such as job training workshops, financial literacy classes, or health fairs. These initiatives solve practical problems and create an environment where community members feel empowered to take control of their own lives. By addressing their community's immediate and long-term needs, African American women leaders ensure that their problem-solving efforts are sustainable and transformative.³⁰

As we move into an increasingly interconnected and diverse global landscape, the leadership traits embodied by African American women at TTM offer a valuable blueprint for reimagining leadership in the future. These women create an inclusive, sustainable, transformative leadership

²⁹ Parker, Patricia S. *Race, Gender, and Leadership: Re-envisioning Organizational Leadership from the Perspectives of African American Women Executives* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 78.

³⁰ Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 145.

model by prioritizing relationships, empathy, and problem-solving. This nurturing leadership model challenges traditional notions of power and authority, offering a leadership vision rooted in community care and collective well-being instead. As more organizations begin to embrace this model, we will likely see a shift in how leadership is practiced and understood, with a greater emphasis on collaboration, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility.³¹

The survey results highlight building strong relationships and problem-solving as key leadership traits for African American women at TTM. This provides a glimpse into a broader leadership philosophy prioritizing empathy, community building, and collective empowerment. These traits are essential within the context of TTM and have far-reaching implications for leadership in a wide range of sectors. TTM's Women's Leadership Initiative exemplifies this leadership model and catalyzes transforming leadership practices within and beyond the church community.³² As the world continues to evolve, the nurturing leadership model offers a powerful alternative to traditional leadership approaches: inclusive, empathetic, and focused on collective growth. One of the key strengths of nurturing leadership is its ability to foster a sense of belonging and connection within the community. We have established diverse leadership teams, including lay leaders who are active and committed to our ministry. The lay leaders have established a worship planning and community outreach team that includes our ministers and congregants with relevant skills and insights. We have also established a youth and elders council. This advisory group is specific to our youth and senior members and ensures that all generations in our ministry have a voice in shaping the church's vision and activities. It creates an environment where every

³¹ Pew Research Center. "Women and Leadership," Pew Research Center, July 14, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/>.

³² SurveyMonkey, "Survey Results on Leadership Development Opportunities for African American Women in Teshuvah Temple Ministries," accessed July 12, 2024, https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-IZJ7khgZzPXA6FLQXuH4Lw_3D_3D/.

congregation member feels valued and heard. This is accomplished through planning, strong communication, and a commitment to fostering a culture where all voices are valued. It is created through a vision for inclusion, whereby, as a ministry, I have set the tone as the leader and emphasize that TTM values input from all members, not just ministers. This intention is reiterated in sermons, meetings, and written communications. For example, during a recent sermon, I shared a story about how each congregation member— a minister, a lay leader, or a regular attendee—has a unique gift to contribute to the church's mission. I highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping the church's direction and called for volunteers to join our newly formed community outreach team. In our monthly leadership meeting, I also created a space for congregants to share their ideas and feedback on upcoming church events, ensuring everyone felt their voice was heard. I also included a section in our weekly newsletter asking for input on a new ministry initiative, encouraging members to email their thoughts and suggestions. In addition, I established clear objectives for inclusive leadership, such as specific areas where congregational input is desired. This approach is critical in a ministry like TTM, which serves a diverse and often marginalized population. Many members of the congregation come from backgrounds where they have experienced social, economic, or racial oppression. For these individuals, a nurturing leadership model offers a sense of safety, support, and empowerment essential for their spiritual and emotional healing.

Nurturing leadership also plays a crucial role in addressing the unique needs of African American women within the church. At TTM, the nurturing leadership style embraced by African American women is recognized as a powerful force for positive change in addressing these needs. These women bring to their leadership roles a deep understanding of the struggles and challenges faced by their community, particularly the challenges related to race, gender, and

class, by drawing from lived experience, intentional listening, and observation, leveraging education and knowledge, advocating for equity, building bridges, fostering inclusive leadership, integrating faith and cultural values, and taking action by leading by example.

This nurturing leadership approach is deeply intertwined with the mission of Teshuvah Temple Ministries, which is to serve the spiritual and practical needs of marginalized individuals. This leadership is characterized by a deep commitment to social justice and a desire to uplift those silenced or marginalized by society. As a result, TTM's outreach programs, including its prison ministry, victim support services, and juvenile justice prevention initiatives, are all rooted in the principles of care, empathy, and empowerment. The women leaders at TTM, particularly those involved in the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), are instrumental in driving these programs forward, offering spiritual guidance and practical support to individuals and families in need.

In many ways, the nurturing leadership model at TTM represents reclaiming African American women's traditional roles in their communities. Black women have been the caregivers, nurturers, and advocates within their families and communities for generations. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, describes the historical role of Black women in providing essential caregiving and leadership in their communities despite often being denied formal leadership positions. They have shouldered the burdens of both racial and gender oppression while simultaneously providing emotional and practical support to those around them.³³

At TTM, this legacy of nurturing and care is acknowledged and celebrated as a vital aspect of the church's leadership by public recognition of leadership contributions, incorporating nurturing leadership into sermons, establishing programs to honor leadership, providing practical support

³³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45-47

to leaders, creating memorials and tributes, and fostering community engagement. The African American women leaders at TTM draw on their cultural heritage and personal experiences to create a leadership model that is both powerful and transformative. Through the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), these leaders have collaborated to shape the church's leadership philosophy and ensure their voices are integral to TTM's growth and direction.

The nurturing leadership style at TTM also challenges the traditional gender roles that have often constrained women's leadership within the church. At TTM, however, women are encouraged to lead and be recognized for their unique contributions to the ministry. The nurturing leadership model allows women to lead from their strengths and gifts rather than conform to a leadership model that prioritizes dominance and control.

This inclusion of WLI emphasizes how the leadership initiative at TTM specifically fosters the empowerment and visibility of women leaders, reinforcing the church's commitment to recognizing their contributions.

Nurturing leadership at TTM is not limited to the spiritual realm. It also extends to the practical and organizational aspects of the ministry. The women leaders at TTM are actively involved in the church's day-to-day operations, from managing finances and overseeing outreach programs to organizing events and providing mentorship to younger congregation members. A deep sense of responsibility and commitment to the well-being of the entire church community characterizes their leadership. This holistic approach to leadership ensures that the church is a place of spiritual growth where individuals can find practical support and guidance in their everyday lives.

Systemic barriers refer to the institutional and structural factors that prevent certain groups, in this case, African American women, from accessing leadership opportunities. These barriers are

often deeply ingrained in religious institutions' cultural and organizational practices, making them difficult to dismantle. For African American women, these barriers are compounded by the intersectionality of race and gender, creating a unique set of challenges that are often not fully understood or addressed by church leadership. In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry describes how societal expectations and stereotypes shape the leadership experiences of African American women, often limiting their ability to be seen as legitimate leaders within their communities.³⁴

At TTM, overcoming this barrier requires fundamentally rethinking what leadership means within the church. Rather than adhering to a rigid, top-down leadership structure, TTM must embrace a more collaborative and inclusive approach that values all its members' diverse leadership styles and gifts. This means creating spaces where women can lead from their strengths through nurturing, empathy, or community-building. Through the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), TTM actively challenges the traditional, patriarchal leadership model and creates a more equitable environment where African American women can fully exercise their leadership potential.

Another systemic barrier that African American women face is the lack of access to theological education and mentorship opportunities. Historically, Black women have been excluded from formal theological training, which has limited their ability to pursue leadership roles within the church. Even today, many African American women struggle to find the resources and support needed to further their education and develop their leadership skills. This lack of access to education prevents women from advancing in church leadership and reinforces the perception that leadership is the domain of men.

³⁴ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 12-14

To address this barrier, TTM must prioritize the education and mentorship of its women leaders. One way to do this is by establishing partnerships with theological institutions, such as Howard University Divinity School, to provide scholarships and fellowships for women seeking theological education. These partnerships can also include mentorship programs through WLI that connect emerging women leaders with experienced clergy who can give guidance and support as they navigate the challenges of church leadership. Patricia S. Parker, in *Race, Gender, and Leadership*, emphasizes the importance of mentorship in developing the leadership skills of African American women, particularly in navigating the complexities of race and gender dynamics in leadership roles.³⁵ By investing in the education and development of its women leaders, Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) can help close the leadership gap and equip African American women with the theological and leadership training necessary to assume more prominent roles within the church.

The Women's Leadership Initiative at Teshuvah Temple Ministries has made significant strides in redefining leadership for African American women in ministry. The program has increased confidence, representation, and community engagement through mentorship, theological training, and hands-on opportunities. Yet, the evaluation findings also reveal areas of ongoing need: systemic inequities, gaps in access, and the underutilization of nurturing leadership traits persist within traditional church structures.

Addressing these challenges requires more than programming—it demands a shift in mindset and a long-term commitment to inclusive, relational leadership models that honor African American women's spiritual gifts and lived experiences. As TTM reflects on the successes and lessons of

³⁵ Patricia S. Parker, *Race, Gender, and Leadership: Re-envisioning Organizational Leadership from the Perspectives of African American Women Executives* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 54-57.

the WLI, the path forward must build upon this foundation to ensure that future leaders are prepared and empowered to shape the church's future with authenticity, wisdom, and purpose.

Future Directions and Modifications

Future iterations of the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) at Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM) will focus on deepening and broadening the program's reach and effectiveness. One key growth area involves expanding the curriculum to include training modules in financial management, church administration, and conflict resolution. These additions will further solidify participants' leadership competencies and ensure they can manage the ministry's spiritual and administrative demands. Plans are also underway to strengthen the mentorship network by incorporating experienced leaders outside TTM. By drawing on diverse perspectives and leadership styles, the program will offer a more dynamic and relevant support system reflective of today's complex faith-based leadership landscape.

To ensure that WLI remains responsive to participants' needs and aligned with ministry goals, TTM will implement a continuous evaluation process. This feedback loop will include periodic surveys, focus groups, and performance assessments to gather qualitative and quantitative data. These tools allow facilitators to make timely, data-informed adjustments while promoting ongoing dialogue between participants, mentors, and program leaders. Beyond TTM, the leadership team is developing a scalable model for replication by other ministries and community organizations. Leveraging WLI's proven structure and outcomes, this expansion aims to spark broader systemic change across faith communities committed to inclusive leadership.

TTM also plans to host forums and dialogue sessions to address lingering resistance to women in leadership. These gatherings promote theological reflection, deepen empathy, and foster cultural

transformation. Rooted in justice and grounded in theological conviction, these initiatives position WLI as a program and a movement to equip African American women for lasting leadership impact.

In today's interconnected world, where collaboration, diversity, and emotional intelligence are essential, nurturing leadership holds significant value. African American women often lead with these very qualities. Yet, many face not a lack of leadership ability but a lack of opportunity. Surveys indicate that nurturing leadership remains underutilized in many institutions, especially among African American women. To address this gap, churches and organizations must prioritize leadership development programs centered on relational skills, empathy, and community care.

Despite their historical role in sustaining church communities, African American women are frequently relegated to secondary roles. These traditional, patriarchal structures diminish leadership diversity and limit the church's spiritual and organizational growth. Barriers such as limited access to theological education, economic hardship, and embedded gender bias further restrict women's pathways to leadership.

This issue is complex and deeply rooted in history, theology, and social inequality. As *Black Womanist Ethics* by Katie G. Cannon notes, such bias is often internalized in church culture.³⁶ For example, a woman may be praised for her service but never considered for the pulpit. Economic constraints also compound the issue. With theological degrees costing between \$15,000 and \$50,000—and the median African American household income around \$48,297—access to formal theological education is out of reach for many. These realities and deeply ingrained cultural expectations perpetuate the leadership gap.³⁷

³⁶ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Pages 75-77

TTM is taking decisive steps through the WLI to dismantle these barriers. By forging partnerships with theological schools, offering scholarships, and creating structured mentorship pipelines, TTM equips emerging leaders with both theological knowledge and practical experience. The initiative's threefold foundation—education, mentorship, and institutional reform—empowers African American women to lead authentically and effectively.

Moving forward, faith-based institutions and community organizations must embrace similar commitments. They must provide flexible leadership pathways, challenge implicit biases, and ensure African American women have both a voice and visibility in decision-making processes. In doing so, we unlock the full potential of nurturing leadership rooted in empathy, collaboration, and collective empowerment.

Now is the time to seize this transformative opportunity. Let us redefine leadership in our churches and organizations by investing in mentorship, expanding access to theological education, and creating spaces where all leaders can thrive. TTM's Women's Leadership Initiative is a replicable model of what's possible. When nurturing leadership is championed, the entire community flourishes, becoming more inclusive, resilient, and spiritually whole.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Questions on Leadership Qualities

Section 1: Leadership Qualities. These questions assess which leadership qualities are most valued within TTM and how members perceive leadership effectiveness.

Section 2: Leadership Development Opportunities. These questions measure the availability of leadership training and support.

- Have you participated in any leadership training, mentorship, or development program within TTM? (Yes/No)
- Why did you not participate in leadership training if you answered 'No' to the previous question? (Select all that apply.)

I was unaware of any leadership development programs.

My schedule does not allow me to participate.

I do not feel confident in my leadership abilities.

The opportunities available do not align with my interests.

Other (please specify)

Section 3: Inclusivity and Representation in Leadership. These questions assess diversity and inclusion in leadership roles.

- Do you believe that leadership roles within TTM are accessible to all members regardless of background, experience, or tenure? (Yes/No)
- What suggestions do you have for improving leadership inclusivity and development within TTM? (Open-ended response)

Appendix 2: Key Survey Results (Summary)

Most Valued Leadership Qualities:

- Communication (92%)
- Empathy (85%)
- Problem-Solving (78%).

Leadership Development Opportunities:

- 78% reported feeling supported
- 22% desired more mentorship programs.
- Diversity in Leadership: 60% believed women are underrepresented in leadership roles within TTM.

Challenges:

- Key barriers included lack of mentorship (40%)
- time constraints (35%),
- lack of confidence (25%).

Appendix 3: Excerpts from Key Texts

1. Sisters in the Wilderness – Hagar’s Story and African American Women in Leadership

Selected Passage: "Hagar, the African slave woman in Sarah’s household, was cast out into the wilderness, forced to survive with her child in a desolate land. She encountered the divine in her suffering—God did not forsake her."

Relevance to TTM Leadership Philosophy: Hagar’s journey mirrors African American women’s leadership struggles—often marginalized, underestimated, and expected to survive in spaces that were not initially designed for them. At Teshuvah Temple Ministries (TTM), we recognize that leadership is not always given; sometimes, it must be claimed.

2. Stony the Road We Trod – The Importance of Inclusive Biblical Interpretation for Leadership

Selected Passage: "For centuries, biblical interpretation has been filtered through the lens of dominant power structures that often ignored or diminished the voices of the oppressed."

Relevance to TTM Leadership Philosophy: This passage emphasizes the necessity of inclusive leadership within faith communities. Traditional interpretations of Scripture have often excluded or minimized the contributions of Black women, reinforcing structures that favor male-dominated leadership.

Appendix 4: TTM Mission Statement

“Teshuvah Temple Ministries exists to empower African American women through inclusive leadership, spiritual growth, and transformative community initiatives.”

Core Leadership Values:

Inclusivity – Ensuring leadership opportunities are available to all.

Spiritual Growth – Developing strong, faith-centered leaders.

Community Impact – Fostering leadership that serves others.

Empowerment – Providing tools and training for effective leadership.

Integrity & Accountability – Upholding honesty and responsibility in leadership.

Appendix 5: Leadership Development Program Overview

Leadership Development Program Objectives:

- Equip Leaders with Biblical and Practical Leadership Skills
- Ensure Inclusive Leadership Opportunities
- Develop Leaders Rooted in Biblical Principles

- Encourage Mentorship and Generational Leadership Development
- Foster Community Engagement & Service Leadership
- Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) – Elevating Women in Ministry
- A Specialized Leadership Track for African American Women in Ministry.
- Equip Black women for leadership roles in ministry and community service.
- Break barriers for women pursuing pastoral & leadership roles.
- Develop confidence in preaching, teaching, and church administration.

Expected Outcomes:

- More women stepping into leadership roles at TTM.
- Stronger mentorship networks among women in ministry.
- Greater visibility and advocacy for women's leadership.

Appendix 6: Historical Context of African American Women in Leadership

African American women have long been at the forefront of spiritual, social, and political movements, yet their leadership has often been overlooked or minimized.

Trailblazers in Faith & Justice:

- Jarena Lee (1783–1864): First authorized female preacher in the AME Church.
- Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961): Founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls.
- Rev. Dr. Prathia Hall (1940–2002): Civil Rights activist and theologian.
- Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie (b. 1947): First female bishop in the AME Church.

Key Shifts in Leadership Today:

- More Black women are being ordained as pastors and bishops.
- Churches are recognizing the need for women-led ministries.
- Digital platforms allow Black women preachers to reach global audiences.
- Challenges That Still Exist:
- Women in ministry still face opposition in conservative faith traditions.
- Lack of financial and institutional support for women-led ministries.

Some congregations resist women in senior leadership despite their qualifications.

How TTM Addresses These Challenges:

- The Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) provides structured mentorship and training.
- Strategic Partnerships with theological institutions to increase access to training.
- Advocacy & Visibility through community engagement and theological education.

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