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Sabbath Rest: A Theological Response to Self-Care for African American Clergy

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Abstract

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This research is designed to examine the causes of burnout in African American pastors in the San Francisco Bay Area and to present an approach for them based on biblical insight with a view towards encouraging them to examine, implement, and maintain identifiable spiritual self-care practices on a continuous basis that will become life giving and life affirming for them and those they serve in the church and the community-at-large in hope of the gifts and graces God has endowed them with will overflow and bring longevity to their lives and their ministry.

Sabbath Rest: A Theological Response to Self-Care for African American Clergy

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Introduction

On Sunday, November 10, 2013 the congregation of Bibb Mount Zion Baptist Church in Macon, GA. was brought to its knees, literally. Based upon numerous news outlets, Pastor Teddy Parker, Jr., their pastor of sixteen years sent his wife and daughters to church ahead of him. Assuming he would show up, his wife and congregation of 800 plus members anxiously waited for him to arrive. Unfortunately, Pastor Parker never did. That morning, while sitting in his car in his driveway, Pastor Teddy Parker, Jr., committed suicide.¹ In a report from Christianity Today, Pastor Parker was found by his wife with a self-inflicted gunshot wound. At age 42, this seemingly successful, anointed, handsome, African American man with a beautiful family and thriving ministry killed himself. One can only sit and wonder what drove him to such measures. What could he possibly have been experiencing in his life and or his ministry to make him want to end his life and impact the lives of so many others in such a profound manner?

Without knowing the intimate details concerning his life, one would consider pastoring a church of 800 plus members not only successful but also flourishing. In addition to his membership, reports state that 20 new ministries were started at Bibb Mount Zion Baptist Church under his leadership.² That is almost one new ministry plus per his sixteen years of pastoring. But what does not often get talked about is the fact that with great “success” comes great responsibility. None of the news reports speak of the weight and possible burden Pastor Parker must have carried upon his shoulders as he oversaw such a thriving ministry. None of the reports speak to the pressures and demands he possibly had succumbed to.

¹ Sarah Weng, “Pastor Teddy Parker commits suicide as congregation waits for him after confessing sometimes he "can't feel God"”, *Christianity Today*, last modified November 13, 2013, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/pastor-teddy-parker-commits-suicide-congregation-waits-for-him-after-confessing-sometimes-he-cant-feel-god/34672.htm>

² Ibid.

On the outside, it sounds as if Pastor Parker was the epitome of ministerial success, at least according to the world's standards. Most pastors would leap at the opportunity to pastor a congregation consisting of 800 plus members along with the opportunity to lay claim to the fact they started 20 ministries alone during their pastorate irrespective of race, denominational affiliation, or gender. Yet according to a radio interview with his friend of 26 years, Pastor E. Dewey Smith, Jr., Pastor Parker had suffered from mental illness for a long time but because he sounded good and looked well on the outside, no one, including Pastor Smith questioned his mental health.³ African Americans are good at wearing masks which simply means we're good at hiding our true feelings. We have had to do so in order to survive in America since the feet of enslaved Africans touched down on American soil.

Without trying to diagnose Pastor Parker, it is possible that he hid what he was truly feeling inside by wearing a mask not only among his loved ones but also among his congregation. It is possible that those around him knew of his struggles but chose to keep silent because of his position as pastor in the church and community, his status, and his authority. It is possible that he had reached his limit and it is very possible that he wanted help for his mental health challenges but was unable to vocalize it or seek it out. Wynnetta Wimberly states that "In the African American religious tradition, we have historically made haste to "hide the nakedness" of our clergy leaders and that oftentimes, these attempts at covering up human frailty have proven detrimental to the pastors themselves as well as the congregations they are called to serve."⁴ When Pastor Parker took his own life, he not only impacted the lives of his loved ones,

³ E. Dewey Smith, "E. Dewey Smith Talks Depression and Suicide Among Pastors," YouTube interview, September 7, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwQvwpyRxc>.

⁴ Wynnetta Wimberly, *Depression in African American Clergy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 5.

and his congregation of 800 plus people who looked to him for pastoral leadership, spiritual guidance, and hope but his death also impacted the lives of those within the community-at-large.

Unfortunately, there are numerous assumptions and possibilities as to why this young African American pastor committed suicide, yet the reality is no one knows, one can only imagine. Although it is not known whether or not Pastor Parker suffered from depression or burnout, which pastors are known to experience, it is a known fact that living with depression and burnout is unhealthy and can be hazardous for anyone especially for pastors as it affects their families, their ministries, and their community.⁵

This research is designed to examine the causes of burnout and present an approach for African American pastors based on biblical insight with a view to encouraging them to implement and maintain identifiable spiritual self-care practices on a continuous basis that will become life giving and life affirming to them so the gifts and graces God has endowed them with will overflow.

Definitions

Burnout

Before we continue, it is important that we define the major concepts incorporated in our research. Our first concept is *burnout*. Burnout is a word that is overused but not fully understood. It has been described as “the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit, and will – an erosion of the human soul” (p. 17)⁶ Burnout is not the same as tiredness or weariness or even fatigue.

⁵ Richard P. Olson et al., *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today's Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2018), 36.

⁶ Thomas M. Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue, Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for the Helping Professions* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 104.

Burnout is much more extreme. It has the capability of touching the depths of one's mind, body, and spirit in a manner that disconnects them from who they are and what they've been called to. It is almost as if one becomes detached from themselves and their environment.

In 1974, German-born American psychologist, Herbert Freudenberg coined the phrase 'burnout' during his work at a New York clinic with drug abusers. Being called a burnout meant that the person no longer cared about anything except drugs. As a consequence of a slow erosion of motivation and competence, the person was not capable of much or interested in anything except for getting high on substances. Hence, one became a burnout.⁷ Freudenberg noticed the characteristics of burnout not only in his patients but he also began to notice it in himself and among his staff as they worked day in and day out with drug addicts who came into their clinic. As a result, the term *burnout* was born.

According to experts, burnout is most common in the helping professions, i.e., those professions that deal mostly with the general public and are involved with the intense giving of oneself to others—such as teachers, social workers, clergy, doctors, lawyers, law enforcement professionals, and therapist to name a few.⁸ Such professions invest over half of their professional time interacting with people and their issues whether they be physical, emotional, spiritual, or behavioral. Oftentimes, burnout is confused with compassion fatigue and although there are some similarities, they are not completely synonymous.

Compassion fatigue results from exposure to hearing about or supporting a client who has suffered from a traumatic event or events.⁹ Thinking more in depth, it would make sense for compassion fatigue to appear more evident in doctors, therapists, counselors, law enforcement

⁷ Ibid, 102.

⁸ Ibid, xvi.

⁹ Ibid, 110.

officials and possibly even teachers due to their repetitive exposure to people and traumatic circumstances. When it pertains to clergy, burnout is a word used most often to describe their condition versus compassion fatigue. This is not to say that clergy cannot or do not experience compassion fatigue or that other helping professionals do not experience burnout.

The Psychology Dictionary defines *burnout* as, “a state of extreme physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.”¹⁰ Furthermore, “it is characterized by a decrease in motivation and performance. On the psychological and nervous aspect, it results from performing at such a high level of stress and tension. With prolonged exertion, it eventually takes a toll on both the body and the mind.”¹¹

In 1995, Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, and Warg added additional words to describe burnout such as frustration, disengagement, stress, depletion, helplessness, hopelessness, emotional drain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism.¹² Based upon additional descriptors, it is feasible to say that clergy are more prone to burnout due to the multiple dimensions of their role and their level of responsibility.

The average African American pastor wears many hats and is looked upon to play the role of not only pastor but that of preacher, prophet/prophetess, teacher, administrator, counselor, worship planner, worship leader, vision caster, mentor, community activists and sometimes even janitor. Having to fulfill numerous roles in different capacities to a large group of people at one time can indeed cause pastors to feel frustrated, disengaged, stressed, depleted, hopeless, helpless, and more. As such, the need for self-care is essential to their overall health and well-

¹⁰ N., Pam M.S., “BURNOUT,” in *PsychologyDictionary.org*, April 7, 2013, <https://psychologydictionary.org/burnout/> (accessed March 29, 2019).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas M. Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue, Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for the Helping Professions* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 103.

being as well as to the well-being of those around them. This leads us to our second concept: self-care.

Self-Care

Self-care is defined as “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one’s own health. The practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress.”¹³ The practice of self-care allows us to take ownership of our health and well-being especially in a world filled with stress, trauma, pain, and despondency. Undoubtedly, our lives are stressful and can become overwhelming at times which is why for some, the practice of self-care can seemingly appear to be an added burden, one more thing to add to one’s to-do list. Yet self-care is a gift we give to ourselves and as a result to others including God.

Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, medical physician and spouse of a Lutheran pastor writes, “Self-care is not selfish. We are stewards of our bodies just as we are stewards of other gifts received from God. Self-care means understanding the meaning of positive health and working towards it.” She adds, “Eat nutritionally and be physically active; take rest. Vacation and Sabbath; attend to relationships; learn new information, ideas, and skills; seek vocational feedback and guidance; and tend to personal spiritual needs and spiritual formation.”¹⁴ In essence, self-care requires one to take time for themselves and to focus on their needs whether they be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, vocational, etc. The practice of self-care is holistic in nature which means it impacts not only one’s body but also one’s mind and spirit.

¹³ www.en.oxforddictionaries.com (accessed March 29, 2019).

¹⁴ Gwen Wagstrom Halass, *The Right Road: Life Choices for Clergy* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 44.

Self-care does not happen by accident; a person must actively engage in the practice of self-care. And not only does a person have to actively engage in it but they also must be intentional regarding it. Eating healthy, being physically active, and being diligent in getting the recommended amount of sleep (6-8 hours) on a nightly basis as well as tending to one's spiritual needs doesn't just happen. It must be planned out and thought through. One must take time to rest, plan daily or weekly Sabbath time as well as plan vacation time, time away from their work, particularly, away from ministry.

Our bodies are gifts from God which God has entrusted to us. This is not a theory but a biblical principle. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 it states, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?"¹⁵ Self-care can be viewed as an act of stewardship. Our bodies belong to God and is the temple of God therefore how we manage our bodies (mentally, physically, emotionally, etc.) signifies whether we are good stewards over what God has entrusted to our care and oversight. As such, in this era of gridlock traffic, overcrowded schedules, and fast food accessibility, it is critical that the practice of self-care be made pertinent to one's way of being. This leads us to our third concept: The Black church which will be defined and discussed in great length in a later section of this research.

Literature Review

The main published resources used to establish a foundation for this research were the works of Wayne Muller¹⁶, Roy Oswald¹⁷, Abraham Joshua Heschel¹⁸, Richard Olson et al.¹⁹, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya²⁰, and Wynnetta Wimberly²¹.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19, New Revised Standard Version

¹⁶ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999).

Wayne Muller's approach to self-care focuses on busyness. For Muller, the act of busyness causes people to negate rest and thus slowly lose our ability to focus, stay connected, and discern the path we should follow. Muller argues that for some, thriving off busyness brings about a sense of accomplishment though in reality it becomes a detriment to individuals and communities. Adopting the principle of Sabbath allows spiritual leaders to reconnect with God, themselves, and others.

Roy Oswald emphasizes the toll stress places upon not only our bodies but also our minds and our need to ameliorate the "twin destroyers" known as stress and burnout. He is careful to make a distinction between stress and burnout for one can experience stress and not necessarily be in a state of burnout. In addition, he places greater emphasis on the pastor as central figure. Knowingly or unknowingly, the pastor serves as a model for others to follow in many areas of life including in health and wellness. According to Oswald, if pastors model health, those they lead will follow in the same direction. Helping clergy to balance the daily demands of their lives and position serves as a model for those who are impacted by their ministry.

Consequently, pastors live busy lives yet amid the busyness, Muller, and Oswald, whose work is referenced often by other writers on the topic of self-care, demonstrate how rest and renewal is possible in the form of Sabbath rest. However, none of these authors address the role

¹⁷ Roy M. Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding A Balance for Effective Ministry* (Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield, 2014).

¹⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The SABBATH* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

¹⁹ Richard P. Olson, Ruth Lofgren Rosell, et al., *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today's Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2018).

²⁰ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990).

²¹ Wynnetta Wimberly, *Depression in African American Clergy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

that community and socio-political issues play in the burden clergy bear especially with regards to minority as well as female clergy located in the urban setting. Moreover, their assessment focuses predominantly on Caucasian, male pastors and omits the complexities people of color as well as women in ministry endure, which makes the practice of self-care appear more of a burden than a necessity.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish Rabbi, examines the gift of Sabbath as a way of life. Heschel outlines the foundation which supports the observance of the Sabbath such as the cessation from work to connect with God, with self, and with others. He writes, “the Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work.”²² Heschel emphasizes the sacredness of time and the reality that time cannot be manipulated by humans for God is the appropriator of it. God has given humankind six days in a week to work, to sweat, to toil, and a seventh day consecrated for rest from all labor, stress, and strain.

According to Olson, Rosell, et al., bi-vocational and multi-vocational ministry is on the rise which means clergy are experiencing extreme pressures due to the additional demands on their time and energy. As such, Olson, Rosell, et al., examines the importance of clergy establishing specialized habits such as setting boundaries, practicing Sabbath, time management, spiritual disciplines, obtaining clergy coaches, and more. In addition, clergy are encouraged to implement practical strategies for themselves such as but not limited to creating a realistic job description, writing a self-care covenant, and designing a definitive weekly schedule. Speaking from a male, Caucasian perspective, Olson, Rosell, et al., invites the voices of an African American clergy colleague, an Asian colleague, along with Ruth Lofgren Rosell and Angela

²² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The SABBATH* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 14.

Barker Jackson (co-authors) to share their unique experiences and challenges in ministry in designated sections of their book. Although these voices are not heard throughout the book on a grand scale, they are included and shed light on the issues experienced.

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya dissect the origins, role and significance the Black church experience has played in the lives of African Americans as well as in the larger American landscape spiritually, politically, socially, and economically. They argue that “religion, seriously considered, is perhaps the best prism to cultural understanding.”²³ For one to understand the African American context, one must strive to understand the African American religious experience in America. This is certainly true as we examine the role of the pastor in the African American religious tradition.

Wynnetta Wimberly highlights the hidden struggles African American clergy face as it relates to depression and suicide, two topics that are known to be taboo in the African American religious and social context. She notes that, “far too long communities of faith have overlooked, denied, or suppressed talk about mental illness within their ranks. This silencing has had devastating effects on members and families.”²⁴ She comments, however, that because there has been an overwhelming increase in clergy suicide within the last decade, a light is now being shined on the topic of mental illness and mental health among clergy and the wider community for all to examine.

Research and Methodology

The data for this research project was mainly collected through library research. This was supplemented by a limited ethnographic study that involved interviews with five African

²³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990), Preface.

²⁴ Wynnetta Wimberly, *Depression in African American Clergy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Foreward.

American pastors of local congregations within the San Francisco Bay Area whose churches or ministries are in the heart of the urban setting. The pastors interviewed were specifically chosen based upon their race, gender, the social location of their ministry context, their role as a Senior Pastor, their role in community activism along with their years of ministry experience.

Out of respect for their identity, the five participants were given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms used were: (a) Moses, a 73-year-old male senior pastor of a 150 member American Baptist church who has been pastoring for 29 years. He is married with three adult children, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren, (b) Paul, a 50+ year old senior pastor of two churches consisting of 140 members total. He is the pastor and founder of one church that is a part of the Evangelical Church and he is the interim pastor of a Seventh Day Adventist Church. He has been pastoring for 30 years. He is married with two adult children, one teenager, and two grandchildren, (c) Vashti is 50+ year old female senior pastor of a 75+ member nondenominational church. She is the pastor and founder of the church which she pastors in two locations. She is married with one adoptive son and one grandchild, (d) Timothy is a 41-year-old male senior pastor of an approximately 50 member Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. He has been pastoring for five years. He is married and has three young children, and (e) Naomi is a 70+ year old female senior pastor of a 150 member Christian Methodist Episcopal Church as well as a Presiding Elder in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. She has been pastoring for close to 20 years. She is divorced and has adult children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Out of respect for their identities, each pastor has been assigned a biblical pseudonym as an identifier.

To further strengthen the research, data was collected through formal and informal interviews with a Jewish Rabbi and the Director of the Center for Jewish Studies both located in

the San Francisco Bay Area. Each interview session proved to be exceptionally informative. As a result of the informal interviews with the Director for the Center of Jewish Studies, a personal invitation was given to shul (synagogue) for Shabbat Saturday service. An additional invitation was given a week later to experience Shabbat fully in the home through the witnessing of the lighting of the candles at sunset on Friday evening welcoming in Shabbat, the Friday evening prayers at shul as well as the gathering for the Friday evening meal with family, friends, and neighbors. Each experience heightened my understanding of Sabbath, particularly, its communal aspects.

In Jewish culture, Shabbat begins immediately after the sun sets on Friday evening and does not end until 2-3 hours after the sun sets on Saturday. Having the opportunity, as an African American Protestant clergywoman, to experience Shabbat proved to be a priceless experience especially as it relates to this research.

My experiences of Shabbat proved beneficial in the formal one-on-one interview with Rabbi “Aaron” for it shaped the type of questions asked and discussed during the interview process. During our time together, Rabbi “Aaron” shared, “Shabbat is a *gift* to sanctify time. It allows us to experience the holiness of time which we see as a blessing. The time you’re sanctifying is whole and complete. Shabbat allows us to step back from our human capacity to create and allows us to celebrate the Creator. The essence of Shabbat is being vs. doing vs. accumulating.”²⁵ When asked if he had the opportunity to stand before a group of African American pastors and explain to them what Sabbath/Shabbat means, what would he tell them?” He replied, “I would tell them, “Shabbat is a great equalizer. Everybody is required to rest on Shabbat. Status goes out of the window. In being, there is a kind of equality. Shabbat is a day of

²⁵ Interview with Rabbi “Aaron”, November 8, 2018.

human dignity and an opportunity to elevate ourselves to human dignity. Since we are all in the image of God, when we bless, we also sanctify. We are liberated and the trappings of power fall away, we give up control, we are forced to step back and release. And finally, Shabbat is about unplugging so we can plug into God.”²⁶

My initial methodology solely consisted of a focus group, but the need to create a space for the pastors where they could feel comfortable and safe being transparent in sharing their emotions and experiences openly without feelings of judgment or competition with their colleagues necessitated a different approach. The use of one-on-one interviews allowed space for the opportunity to have an open and honest dialogue with each pastor.

Because, the several of the pastors interviewed are bi-vocational and multi-vocational with families, being sensitive to demanding and tight schedules was important. With that said, when applied to pastors, the term *bi-vocational* means they have a second job, oftentimes, a full-time secular job in addition to pastoring. The term *multi-vocational* means the pastor has several jobs (2-3 secular jobs) in addition to their role as a pastor. Therefore, the creation of a large focus group was impossible. In addition, the idea of trying to schedule the focus group meeting during a convenient time for all would have been extremely challenging. With the use of one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to adapt their schedule to that of each of the pastors as needed as well as travel to a location that was suitable for them which made the interview process as conducive as possible.

²⁶ Ibid.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of twenty-three open-ended questions. Samples of these questions are as follows-

1. Do you have a career outside of the church? If so, how does it impact your ministry?
2. Have you experienced burnout at some point in your ministry? If so, what methods have you used to recover from it?
3. We all experience times when our spirits are down (even depressed). What strategies do you use, or have found effective in the past, when you experience dejection or despair in your ministry?
4. What, if any, spiritual practices do you adhere to as it relates to self-care?
5. What is your understanding of Exodus 20:8 which states, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy”²⁷?
6. Do you regularly practice Sabbath/Sabbath rest?

Historical Framework

Overview of the Black church

There is an institution that exist that is not paralleled by any other. For more than two centuries this institution has stood the test of time. It is an institution that has produced some of the most outstanding orators, thinkers, musicians, entertainers, comedians, activists, politicians, and scholars this world has ever known. It is an institution born out of oppression, yet it has given birth to some of the most pivotal movements this country has ever witnessed. This institution is not a college or a university although many have been birthed from it. It is not even a hospital or a community center in the traditional sense. This institution described is none other than the Black church.

The third concept to be defined is the Black church with the understanding that the extent of the Black church is too vast to be minimized to one single definition. Mary Hinton writes, “The black church is more than a religious institution. The adoption of Christianity by the enslaved was a conscious decision and response to enslavement. The black church then, though

²⁷ Exodus 20:8, New Revised Standard Version.

“compelled into existence,” became constitutive of being black in America. In response to this reality, the black church has served as an educational, social, political, and religious outlet.”²⁸

Though the origins are the same, the Black church is anything but homogenous. It is as diverse and multifaceted as humanity itself. The Black church consists of Protestants and Catholics, storefront churches and mega churches, urban churches and rural churches, established churches and new church plants and others in between all having different worship styles, traditions, doctrines, and governance. Hinton suggests, “While the black church has largely remained stable across time, the black church, much like black people, is not monolithic. There is, and always has been a diversity of practice and perspective.”²⁹ No two black churches are the same. Although commonalities exist, they each are unique and distinctive in their own way.

For generations, the Black church has been the central and most influential institution for all things pertaining to Black life and of the Black community. C. Eric Lincoln writes, “Its very existence was the concrete evidence of the determination of Black Christians to separate themselves from the white Christians, whose cultural style and spiritual understanding made no provision for racial inclusiveness at a level acceptable to Black people.”³⁰ Since the first enslaved Africans stepped foot onto American soil until the present, many African Americans have found refuge from this hostile world in the bosom of Black churches.

Critique of the Black church

Traditionally, the Black church has not only been a place where African Americans have been able to express themselves religiously but it has also served as a place where our blackness

²⁸ Mary Hinton, *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 13-14.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

³⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 107.

and creativity has been affirmed, our voices have been heard, our God-given gifts have been unveiled, nurtured, and expressed, and our fight for freedom, justice, and equality in this country have been ignited. Yet, like any other influential institution of this magnitude, the Black church has not been without its critics. Some of those critics have been found outside of the Black church (Malcolm X although it is known that his father was a Baptist minister before his death) but there have also been many found within.

One of the biggest critics of the Black church after the Civil Rights Movement was Black Liberation theologian, James H. Cone. Cone writes, “Black churches ought also to be *thinking* churches- that is, churches that are so concerned about the authenticity of their faith that they are willing to subject it to the most rigorous intellectual questioning. Only in that way can we black Christians not fail to remember the need to continually test and correct our faith by the biblical witness and faith of our forebearers.”³¹ Cone was far from silent about his critique of the Black church. In many of his writings he takes exception with the state of the Black church and the direction he felt the church was going in. His critique led to a tension of sorts between the leaders within the Black church community and Black Liberation Theologians.

There is no perfect institution, not even the church. The church, particularly, the Black church was and is currently not without its faults and shortcomings yet the impact the Black church has had upon its members, society, and the country at-large cannot be understated.

From its birth in the hush harbors of slavery to its formation of seven historically black denominations (African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., and the Progressive National

³¹ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 118.

Baptist Convention, Inc.,)³² to the mega churches we see today, the Black church has evolved over its lifespan. Through slavery, Reconstruction, segregation, the Black Power and Black Liberation Movements to now the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Black church has not faltered. Although the Black church may not be viewed in the same light as it once was during African American history or possess the same amount of power, it remains the foundation for countless African Americans today. The church's contributions to other components of Black life such as educational, social, political, and economical cannot be overlooked. In addition to the creation of higher learning institutions such as colleges and universities, the church was also responsible for creating banking institutions, low-incoming housing, and insurance companies³³.

Persona of the Black Pastor

In addition to the Black church, for generations, the Black pastor has served as the most powerful figure in the center of it all. Dating back to slavery, the slave preacher not only served as the conduit through which God spoke concerning the plight of those enslaved but also as the mediator between the people and the slave master and overseer. W.E.B. Du Bois writes, "The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist,--all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number."³⁴ "Lincoln and Mamiya adds, "From their beginnings in the "invisible institution" of slave religion, African Americans have invested far more authority in the charismatic personality of the preacher than in any organizational forms

³² Black Protestant Denominations. The Association of Religion Data Archives. www.thearda.com. (accessed on February 28, 2019).

³³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990), 8.

³⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fall River Press, 1908), 165.

of bureaucratic hierarchy.”³⁵ The pastor in the African American religious context has been and continues to be a formidable figure carrying the dual responsibility of being the voice of God and the voice of the people, from ushering their flocks from birth to death, to leading the people spiritually and politically within the church, community, and sometimes the world.

Regardless of the era in history or social location, whenever there was and continues to be a crisis which impacts the lives of those within the African American community, the pastor is called upon and expected to speak to it. Wimberly gives reason for this as she writes, “At the most fundamental human level, the preacher affords African Americans the type of mutuality, personhood, respect, and care they fail to receive in the broader white world. Conferring this level of influence upon any one individual may be difficult for some to grasp, but in the cultural tradition of enslaved and freed Africans, it reflects the broader communal desires of the people.”³⁶ As a result, the external as well as internal pressures, demands, and expectations pastors often endure are overwhelming and can often lead to burnout and depression.

The responsibilities African American pastors carry are heavy in nature which is why it is not surprising that many (not all) of them suffer from burnout on more than one occasion throughout the course of their ministry. Admittedly, some of those pressures African American clergy experience are self-imposed while others come along with pastoring and serving an African American church, particularly in an urban setting. When we say self-imposed, we are referring to the pressures and demands clergy place on themselves to achieve success in life and, for some, in ministry according to the standards of American culture.

³⁵ Ibid, 14.

³⁶ Wynnetta Wimberly, *Depression in African American Clergy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 42-43.

Reflecting upon the interviews conducted, it became evident that burnout has a way of sneaking up on you which is why many of the pastors did not realize they were experiencing burnout until it began to manifest in their bodies through sickness or in their minds in the form of depression.

Susan L. Taylor, former Editor-in-Chief of Essence Magazine writes, “Too often we work overtime, hiding it behind a mask that makes us appear to be powerful, in control, and confident. The reality is that, privately, in the silence of our souls, we are dying because we simply don’t know how to reach out for help.”³⁷ With regards to the pastors interviewed, their role as senior pastors in African American meant that, they always have to appear to have everything under control. Instead of showing any sign(s) of weakness, many pastors will hide behind masks, masks too many African Americans are historically known to wear to survive the tumultuous waters of life and in some instances, ministry.

Although it is no secret pastors have a history of neglecting their own physical, mental, and spiritual needs for the sake of serving others, God has empowered them to lead God’s people not only through their gifts of leadership, preaching, and teaching but also through the way they choose to care for their bodies, minds, and spirits. Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter declare, “A loss of health means a loss of ministry. If dedicated ministers’ pace themselves, care for their bodies, and guard their health, they can expand their ministries rather than cut them short by an early death or failing health.”³⁸ Regrettably, several of the pastors interviewed admitted their reluctance to stop and rest when they felt their bodies getting to a point of exhaustion. As noted

³⁷ Susan L. Taylor, foreword to *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We’re Not Hurting: Real Talk for When There’s Nowhere to Go But Up*, by Terrie M. Williams (New York, Scribner Books, 2008), xxi.

³⁸ Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 67.

by Trull and Carter, these pastors fail to realize that their reluctance could have dire consequences on their ministry and more importantly, on their lives.

Furthermore, the manner which pastors care for themselves or fail to do so will be reflected in the quality of ministry they are able to embody and therefore extend to their community of faith and the community-at-large.

Societal and structural challenges facing the African American Community

African American pastors must contend with sociological factors that impact their ministry and therefore their health. Some of these contributing factors are ingrained in culture and large in scope and others are sociological. While pastoring in the urban setting for example, African American pastors must contend with issues such as racism, mass incarceration, poverty, gentrification, and a lack of financial resources to name a few. All the pastors interviewed pastor churches in urban areas with limited financial resources. As a result, majority of the pastors (apart from one) are bi-vocational or multi-vocational, meaning they have full-time jobs outside of the church.

Although all the pastors have a desire to solely dedicate themselves to the work of the ministry, their reality is they must work outside of the church to provide for themselves and their families. Four of the five pastors shared that they not only receive minimal pay, but they also do not receive benefits such as medical, dental, or retirement therefore their need to work outside of the church is not only necessary, but it is mandatory. In addition, living in one of the most expensive areas of the United States, the San Francisco Bay Area, pastors must obtain employment outside of the church to financially survive.

Economic challenges

The cost of living in the Bay Area is tremendously expensive. San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara (also known as Silicon Valley) and San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward³⁹ are considered number one and number three respectively as the most expensive places to live in the country. In 2018, San Francisco was ranked as the most expensive place to live; with a necessary income of \$123,268 in order to live comfortably. The city of San Jose ranked number three with a necessary income of \$99,431 while the city of Oakland ranked fourth with a necessary income of \$95,611.⁴⁰ Of the five pastors interviewed, three of them pastor churches located in Oakland, one in San Francisco, and the other in Menlo Park which is within the San Jose (Silicon Valley) region.

Based upon the numbers listed in the aforementioned article and based upon the pastoral salaries received which would not be considered a livable wage for the San Francisco Bay Area, every pastor interviewed does not live in the immediate area in which they pastor due in large part to the steep cost of living. The further out one lives in the Bay Area, the more “affordable” housing becomes.

The costs of living and pastoring in the San Francisco Bay Area increases the burden these African American pastors must carry. Having to balance the full-time demands of pastoring along with one and sometimes two additional jobs outside of the church adds more weight and

³⁹ Andy Kiersz. “The most and least expensive places to live in America.” Business Insider.com, published on December 28, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/america-most-expensive-places-to-live-2018-5>. (accessed on December 28, 2018).

⁴⁰ Minda Zetlin. “Here's How Much You Need to Live Comfortably in America's 10 Most Expensive Cities: San Francisco, New York, and Boston are great places to live, but at a cost,” Inc.com, published on April 5, 2018, <https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/cost-of-living-san-francisco-new-york-boston-most-expensive-cities.html>. (accessed December 28, 2018).

pressure to an already demanding schedule and workload. During one interview session, one pastor shared, “I would prefer to work for my giving rather than my living.”⁴¹

The idea of having to divide one’s time, effort, and energy into several pieces’ places African American pastors in a quandary. Several of them would prefer to not have to divide their time between the work of the ministry and secular employment, but with the staggering cost of living being such as it is in the Bay Area and the lack of financial resources experienced by many of the local churches, African American pastors find themselves in the same financial bind as many of their congregants which leads them to have no choice but to seek employment outside of the church. Because the pastors I interviewed varied denominationally, it appeared the common link between them and the financial pressures they face were the approximate size and location of their congregations.

As a result of limited financial resources, pastors must seek employment outside of the church which limits their time and availability to their congregations who oftentimes suffer as a result. Lincoln and Mamiya writes, “Black churches with pastors who have other full-time jobs are usually open only on designated weekends, and members of such churches often do not receive the kind of pastoral care and attention that full-time clerical oversight can offer.”⁴² Although a pastor’s time at the church may be limited due to the obligations of their employment outside of the church, pastors are always on-call. As such, the demands of being a pastor never cease whether you are a full-time pastor or a bi-vocational or multi-vocational pastor. Undoubtedly, these factors contribute to the reason African American pastors fail to practice self-care, especially on a consistent basis.

⁴¹ Interview with “Vashti”, December 13, 2018.

⁴² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990), 132.

Social and communal challenges

Wynnetta Wimberly states, “Multiple socioeconomic factors perpetuate the pervasive structural exclusion of African Americans from the broader society: poverty, unemployment, broken family systems (originating in slavocracy), illiteracy, crime, substance abuse, health disparities, and now the “new plantation” of mass incarceration. Each factor signifies how well or poorly African Americans are faring in the context of a global economy.”⁴³ If African Americans pastors are not experiencing these factors directly, they are experiencing them indirectly because of their ministry to their congregations and communities. Traditionally, members of African American churches enter into the sanctuary with the weight of the world on their shoulders knowing, trusting, and believing that the church is not only a “hospital” where they can find healing for their weary soul but also a place of refuge where they can unload their heavy burdens.

Many congregants within the African American religious context find themselves fighting the social ills of racism, poverty, mass incarceration, etc. that plague all of us who are black in America. As the leader of the congregation, the pastor has always been looked upon to shoulder the burden of the people. This does not take into consideration the pastor may be shouldering his/her own burdens considering they too are faced with many of the same social ills, particularly, racism. As African Americans, racism is a burden all must bear no matter one’s gender, academic or socio-economic status. Knowingly or unknowingly, racism effects all arenas of life for African Americans especially when it comes to our physical and mental well-being.

Historically, African Americans have shunned away from the topics of depression and mental illness yet today these once taboo topics are being openly discussed. During the

⁴³ Wynnetta Wimberly, *Depression in African American Clergy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 45-46.

interviews conducted, two of the pastors interviewed were open and willing to discuss their bouts with depression and mental illness. Pastor “Paul” shared, “I was diagnosed as clinically depressed at a young age, before I accepted my call to ministry therefore it is something I’ve struggled with most of my life, yet I find spending time with God helps me to deal with it or keep it at bay.”⁴⁴ Pastor “Vashti” stated, “Before I identify the cause and make changes, sometimes, I first pay attention to some of the symptoms such as disinterest, short temper, disorganization, procrastination, etc.”⁴⁵ Looking from the outside, one would never know that these pastors struggle with feelings of despair and dejection especially with the power and force and anointing they minister with but we must ask the question, “What does one who does struggle with feelings of despair and dejection (depression) look like?”

The work of a pastor and all that comes along with it is far from effortless especially when it comes to pastoring a group of people who have been dehumanized and traumatized for generations by slavery, violence, racism, oppression, and marginalization.

Two other important factors that can lead to burnout for pastor’s are poverty and mass incarceration. The pastors interviewed serve congregations where a number of the members live below the poverty line. Keeping in mind the costs of living in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly, Silicon Valley, possessing a degree and a full-time job does not exempt one from being considered poor. As a result, many parishioners look to the church and specifically to the pastor for additional resources such as food, clothing, and financial assistance, particularly for utilities.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor states, “Poverty contributes to a host of other social ills: 26 percent of Black households are “food insecure,” the governments euphemistic description of

⁴⁴ Interview with “Paul”, December 11, 2018.

⁴⁵ Interview with “Vashti”, December 13, 2018.

hunger; 30 percent of Black children are hungry; 25 percent of Black women are without health insurance; 65 percent of all new AIDS diagnoses are among Black women.”⁴⁶

The rate of poverty being experienced by parishioners within African American churches deeply impact the limited resources churches have and can provide. Being in a position where they feel they are unable to fully serve their people inside the church as well as within the community causes the pastors interviewed additional stress. Not only do they have a heart for God, but they also have a sincere heart for the people they are called to serve. Accordingly, pastors must also recognize their limitations. They can only provide to the extent of their resources. With limited financial and human resources, what the pastor and the church can provide has its limits.

The final and probably most challenging issue African American pastors must contend with is ministering to the families of those who are incarcerated. Undoubtedly, African Americans, particularly, African American males are incarcerated at alarming rates. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes, “The systematic over-imprisonment of Black people, and Black men in particular, has conflated race, risk, and criminality to legitimize close scrutiny of Black communities as well as the consequences of such scrutiny”.⁴⁷ As the incarceration of Black men (and women) continues to increase and Black communities remain under siege by the police, African American pastors find themselves as a conduit between their Black congregants and their families, the Black community, and the police in a manner evocative of the way in which the slave preacher was the conduit between the slaves and the slave masters during slavery.

⁴⁶ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *#BLACKLIVESMATTER TO BLACK LIBERATION* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

Because the Black church does not separate the spiritual from the political, African American pastors are continuously called upon to be a voice for the voiceless, to exhibit hope for the hopeless, and to be a ray of light in the midst of a darkened world. In the words of Pastor “Paul”, “I am looked upon to have hope even when I, myself, have feelings of hopelessness.”⁴⁸ This statement leads one to believe that while faithfully leading the people of God within the church and the communities in the Bay Area, African American pastors are oftentimes working from a deficit, a deficit which extends beyond the financial component and reaches the physical, emotional, and spiritual expanses of their lives.

Power within the Black church

Despite the challenges currently faced by African American pastors, churches, and communities, there is a healing power that can be found within its midst. This healing power is expressed in the form of worship through the singing, praying, and preaching synonymous with the Black church tradition along with its communal aspects. These components of worship have the capacity to draw the people close to the Spirit of God and the Spirit of God close to the people. From Africa to America, from slavery to the present day, from Reconstruction to the March on Washington, Africans/African Americans have used these elements to propel us from bondage to liberation.

Singing

The songs of the Black church have been known to bring comfort and strength to one’s weary soul. From Spirituals to Gospel to Contemporary, the music of the church has a way of reminding us that “God will make a way out of no way.” Melva Wilson Costen writes, “Singing is an artistic form inextricably interwoven into the fabric of all African cultures. It provides a

⁴⁸ Interview with “Paul”, December 11, 2018.

divine channel through which God speaks and believers respond.”⁴⁹ She adds, “Singing has a mysterious power that frees the human spirit so that the Spirit of God can penetrate.”⁵⁰ Whether one is stressed or depressed, happy or sad, thankful and grateful, the songs of the church have the power and potential to speak to us right where we are. This power gives us strength when we are weak and hope when we are discouraged.

Preaching

The preached Word is the lifeline of the people individually and collectively. Through the man or woman of God, the people of God are fed “bread from heaven.” When the preacher stands before the congregation, it is understood that the people want and need to hear from God and God alone. Kenyatta Gilbert writes, “African American preaching is more than an artistic expression; it is foremost an act of worship. It is ministry of spoken and embodied Word in service to the gospel of Jesus Christ for the community. In other words, it is proclamation of the good news that *does* something—it names, provokes, encourages, teaches, and inspires faith—on God’s behalf.”⁵¹ The preached Word gives us (the congregation as well as the preacher) hope, strength, and encouragement to keep fighting the good fight of faith.

Praying

In generations past, you would hear the “older” saints in the Black church speak of the “need to have a little talk with Jesus and tell Him all about our troubles.” This saying is indicative of them stealing away and praying to the Lord. Prayer is one of the pillars of faith of the Black church. Costen writes, “The prayer tradition of contemporary Black worship, like

⁴⁹ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

⁵¹ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 10-11.

music and preaching, rooted in Africa, has been nurtured in meeting houses and personal prayer lives of slaves and remains a means of vital force for spiritual release and fulfillment.”⁵² We understand that prayer changes people and situations. In corporate prayer, the cares and concerns of the people, including the pastor are offered up to God and we make intercession for one another. Through prayer, God is glorified, Jesus is magnified, the church is edified, and the people are sanctified.

Community

Culturally, the Black church has always been more than a place of worship or a gathering space. The church has been and continues to be an extension of the family and the community-at-large. It is a place where surrogate mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, and grandparents reside. It is a place where one receives love, support, and encouragement as well as instruction and correction. Mary Hinton writes, “For others, the black church represents a powerful force in building and sustaining communities, especially with regard to providing a moral perspective from which to tackle communal problems.”⁵³ Truly, it is a place of belonging. Peter Paris suggests, “Constant with the understandings of their African forebearers, African Americans have always known that persons cannot flourish apart from a community of belonging.”⁵⁴ And within this community of belonging participants experience growth, healing, faith, peace, love, joy, acceptance, and affirmation of who they are and who God has created them to be.

⁵² Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 106.

⁵³ Mary Hinton, *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 14.

⁵⁴ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 117.

A Theology of Sabbath

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we bear witness to the importance placed upon and the significance of the Sabbath. The Compact Bible Dictionary defines Sabbath as, “the practice of observing one day in seven as a time for rest and worship. This practice apparently originated in creation, because God created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh (Gen. 1).”⁵⁵

Probably, the most significant Scripture passage regarding the practice of Sabbath is found in Genesis 2:2-3 which reads, “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So, God **blessed** the seventh day and **hallowed** it, because on it God rested from all the work he had done in creation.”⁵⁶ By resting on the Sabbath day, God sanctified it and made it holy. This was made possible because all of God’s work was complete.

The New Interpreter’s Bible states, “As with God, so with human beings; their six days of work are brought to fulfillment when integrated with keeping sabbath. On the far side of sin, resting on the sabbath becomes a *sign* that God’s creative order continues to exist in the present.”⁵⁷ As with God, we, too, are called to sanctify the Sabbath and to make it holy. We can do so by ceasing from our labor and our endless strivings and choosing to rest in God. Because the truth is, there will always be more emails to respond to, more voicemails to check, more text messages to read, more meetings to attend, more sermons to write, more bible studies to prepare for and more people to pray with for the work of the ministry is endless.

⁵⁵ Ronald F. Youngblood, F.F. Bruce, & R.K. Harrison, *Nelson’s Compact Series: Compact Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 530.

⁵⁶ Genesis 2:2-3, New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 347.

Biblical Image of Burnout

The Prophet Elijah is one of several biblical models for burnout. Other models found in Scripture are Moses, the Prophet Jeremiah, and the Apostle Paul to name a few. For this research we will focus on the story of Elijah found in 1 Kings 19:4-8 which reads,

⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."⁶ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again.⁷ The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."⁸ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.⁵⁸

Scripture along with Christian tradition has recorded Elijah as a mighty prophet whom God worked through in supernatural ways, yet Scripture also records that he struggled with burnout, depression, and suicidal thoughts due to the pressures he felt because of his call to ministry.

In the proceeding chapter, Elijah has a showdown on Mount Carmel with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. After accomplishing an astounding victory through the Spirit of God against the false prophets and killing them as a result, he received a death threat from Queen Jezebel and became frightened. The New Interpreter's Bible states, "Elijah has been blessed with much success, but at the slightest sign of a reversal of fortune, he is ready to quit. In this story we find all the signs of ministerial burnout. Those who are

⁵⁸ 1 Kings 19:4-8, New Revised Version.

psychologically inclined might point out that Elijah manifests all the signs of depression. He appears to be totally worn out, fatigued.”⁵⁹

After receiving the message from Jezebel, Elijah leaves his servant and flees for his life. He runs into the wilderness where he collapses from exhaustion under a broom tree. While asleep, an angel appears and provides him with water and a cake. After eating, Elijah falls back asleep. The angel appears a second time and provides Elijah with food and encourages him to eat. Dan Epp-Tiessen writes, “Elijah is in crisis and wants to terminate both his prophetic ministry and his life. In an act of sheer grace God intervenes, provides the prophet with life-giving food and water, and suggests a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, the place that is forever associated with the source and essence of Israel’s faith.”⁶⁰

Undoubtedly, after his ministry on Mount Carmel, Elijah was exhausted and his actions are proof that when we experience burnout, we are unable to think clearly, function appropriately, and we adopt a warped sense of reality, yet God’s grace abounds.

After time spent in the wilderness where he was able to take time away from his ministerial duties, and receive physical and spiritual nourishment at the hands of the angel, then and only then was Elijah imbued with the strength he needed to continue the work of the ministry God had called him to. Epp-Tiessen adds, “this story calls out to those among God’s people who are worn-out, fearful, or in need of renewal. The story suggests a way forward—eat and drink of God’s life-giving sustenance, return to the bedrock of faith, listen for God’s still small voice. That may be the way to find new energy, new visions, and a new sense of

⁵⁹ Choon-Leong Seow, “The First and Second Book of Kings,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 145.

⁶⁰ Dan Epp-Tiessen, “1 Kings 19: The Renewal of Elijah,” *Direction*, 35 no 1, published September 2006, 33-43, (accessed December 29, 2018), <http://www.directionjournal.org/>.

purpose.”⁶¹ Like Elijah, the “journey will be too much” for African American pastors if they continue to minimize the importance of their physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being. As in the case of the prophet, time away from the responsibilities of ministry for refreshment and renewal are critical for pastors as well as those they serve therefore the initiation of a weekly Sabbath practice as a form of self-care is strongly recommended.

Because the work of the ministry is endless, it is important for the African American pastors interviewed as well as others in the San Francisco Bay Area to actively participate in the practice of Sabbath rest. Yet, Pastor “Moses” does not believe that the term *Sabbath* is applicable to New Testament Christians and therefore is not applicable to him. Instead of adopting a Sabbath practice or model, he believes we are called to the model of Hebrews 4:1-11 which speaks of the rest that God promises to those who obey.

According to the biblical interpretation of Pastor “Moses”, he does not believe the rest of God is confined to one specific day or based upon one specific action including worship but does believe it can be accomplished in different intervals and in different forms.⁶² The freedom found in the text makes the rest of God appear optional versus a commandment, directive, or invitation from God. As such, the probability for indifference to the text is extremely high including in the life of Pastor “Moses” as he shared, he has experienced burnout on several occasions throughout his 28 years of ministry only stopping to rest when he has reached his ultimate limit.

Pastor “Moses” was one of two pastors with this perspective. His perspective on Sabbath rest and the rest found in Hebrews 4:1-11 was shared by Pastor “Timothy”. Pastor “Timothy” explained his position by stating, “I believe we are called to enter God’s rest according to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Interview with “Moses”, November 16, 2018.

Hebrews 4:1-11 which means taking time to rest, allowing oneself to rest and be at ease.”⁶³ Of the other three pastors interviewed, Pastor “Paul” held a very different perspective regarding Sabbath. He stated that, “Shabbat is communal and therefore African in nature and therefore cannot be practiced in the absence of community. Although I personally embrace Shabbat/Sabbath and all its components, I feel Shabbat/Sabbath is revolutionary which would cause those I’m acquainted with in the African American religious context to be resistant to it.”⁶⁴ He is right, the practice of Sabbath can be viewed as revolutionary to those who may not have been exposed to or enlightened concerning it.

When Scripture is further examined, we find God’s command regarding the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8 which states, *remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.*⁶⁵ For generations of Protestants, particularly those who fall into the categories of Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterian, and Catholic, the interpretation of Exodus 20:8 has been to attend church for the purpose of worship especially when you consider that the Christian calendar records Sunday as the beginning of the week. If we apply this interpretation to African American clergy, particularly, African American pastors, then Sabbath would not be applicable.

The Sabbath or Sunday as Christians interpret it, is regarded as a workday for those in ministry, especially senior pastors. As a result, if Sabbath is to be applied and therefore practiced, it will have to be established for African American pastors on a day other than Sunday so they can enjoy the sacred rest God has ordained.

⁶³ Interview with “Timothy”, December 18, 2018.

⁶⁴ Interview with “Paul”, December 11, 2018.

⁶⁵ Exodus 20:8, New Revised Standard Version.

Jesus and Sabbath Observance

The Synoptic Gospels record numerous encounters Jesus had with the Pharisees regarding Sabbath observance. In the Gospel of Mark, it reads, “Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.”⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent.⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”⁶⁶

Nowhere in the Synoptic Gospels can it be found that Jesus opposed the practice of the Sabbath nor did he break the Sabbath. In fact, the Gospels show Jesus often in the synagogue on the Sabbath which is Jewish custom. Jesus’ opposition regarding the Sabbath centered on the legalistic nature in which the Pharisees interpreted the commandment concerning the Sabbath and their attempts to oppress the community as a result. William Barclay writes, “The orthodox Jewish attitude to the Sabbath was completely rigid and unbending. To the Pharisee, religion was *ritual*: it meant obeying certain rules and regulations. Jesus broke these regulations and they were genuinely convinced that he was a bad man. To Jesus, religion was *service*. It was love of God *and* love of others. Ritual was irrelevant compared with love in action.”⁶⁷ Michael Rogness adds, “Jesus was not disputing the need to observe the Sabbath, nor was he abrogating the law. His rebuttal to the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath was consistent with the clear direction of the

⁶⁶ Mark 3:1-6, New Revised Standard Version.

⁶⁷ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark with Introduction by John Drane* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 78-79.

Old Testament prophets to view compassion and love—the good of the people—as the first and foremost purpose of the law.”⁶⁸

As Savior and Lord, Jesus, throughout the Gospels, places the needs of humankind over the Law and shows that the essence of Sabbath is healing and restoration and enforcing good versus oppression and harm. This can include harm to one’s own body, mind, and spirit. The healing of the man and restoring him to wholeness, particularly, on the Sabbath day offers us a picture of the healing and restoration God offers to us in the form of Sabbath rest.

Pastoral Interpretation of Sabbath

During the interview process, each pastor was asked their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment found in Exodus 20:8. Pastor “Vashti” stated her interpretation of the scripture is, “It means to be quiet and still before God as in Psalm 51. It reminds me of the beauty of silence knowing that God is in the silence. In the silence, I perceive God saying, “You don’t talk, and I won’t talk either. Just be still.”⁶⁹ Pastor “Naomi” stated, “Do what I can, when I can.”⁷⁰

Another way of viewing Sabbath according to Wayne Muller is understanding, “Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true. It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us.”⁷¹

The healing and restoration Sabbath offers could not necessarily be enjoyed by African American pastors while performing their ministerial duties on Sundays therefore a Sabbath

⁶⁸ Michael Rogness, “The Sabbath: Holy Time.” *Word & World*, 36 no 3, summer 2016, 285-291. <http://www.luthersem.edu/>. (accessed January 10, 2019).

⁶⁹ Interview with “Vashti”, December 13, 2018.

⁷⁰ Interview with “Naomi”, December 28, 2018.

⁷¹ Wayne Muller, *SABBATH: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 8.

alternative would need to be created with the understanding that Sabbath is not simply a day physically off from work but a day solely *consecrated* in beauty and holiness where “all” things cease. A day set aside to be one with oneself, to be one with God, and to be one with creation. Unfortunately, this oneness Muller speaks of is not supported by the success driven, overly ambitious culture we live in. American culture teaches us to work as hard as possible for as long as possible even unto death so one can accumulate as much as possible.

African American pastors are not exempt from the lure of overwork and worldly accumulation. In fact, one pastor, “Paul” admitted that he is a workaholic by choice and not by force based upon his personal circumstances.⁷² He is addicted to overwork yet what he may not be realizing is that he is doing himself more harm than good. Walter Brueggemann writes, “God rested on the seventh day, God did not show up to do more. God absented God’s self from the office.”⁷³ Brueggemann goes on to add, “God is not a workaholic.”⁷⁴ If God is not a workaholic and we are made in the image of God, then we, too should not adopt the role of workaholics. That means whether our work is complete or not, we allow our whole selves (minds, bodies, and spirits) to rest in God and with God because the reality is, our work will never be finished.

Examining the personality profile of the workaholic, Rabbi Irving Greenberg argues, “The inability to stop work is not always imposed by an outside oppressor; it may reflect a psychological enslavement of the individual. Workaholics abound who cannot ever relinquish work. The ability to stop working is, therefore, an assertion of an inner freedom.”⁷⁵ But how does one not fall into the trap of workaholism that Greenberg speaks of especially pastors whose

⁷² Interview with “Paul”, December 11, 2018.

⁷³ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath As Resistance: Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 29.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 29-30.

⁷⁵ Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Summit Books, 1998), 138.

business hours of operation are perceived to be 24 hours, 7 days a week? Or pastors who are bi-vocational or multi-vocational? Or pastors whose ministries are demanding due to the lack of resources? None of these questions are easy to answer but does make one consider the different challenges pastors will face when determining to practice Sabbath or not.

The practice of Sabbath can be viewed as an extension of the concept of self-care. In the beginning of this research, self-care was defined as “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one’s own health.”⁷⁶ Simply put, this means being intentional about making one’s health a priority. This can be accomplished by scheduling Sabbath in one’s weekly planner and protecting it from being intruded upon by others, resting voluntarily versus being forced to rest by illness or injury.

Michael Rogness writes, “Rest” is not only one of the purposes of Sabbath but a fundamental human need regardless of any religious implications. We have been given this gift of time.”⁷⁷ However, Pastors tend to neglect themselves and their need for rest to the extent that many miss opportunities to be refreshed, revived, and renewed. These missed opportunities can be rectified through the intentional practice of Sabbath rest. Rogness concludes, “God established the Sabbath as “holy time,” so time itself is God’s time, and time is for us a precious gift of God. We live every day, every hour, every minute in God’s time!”⁷⁸

During our interview, Pastor “Naomi” shared, “I didn’t realize I was burned out until a few months ago. I kept moving although I was feeling burned out. Eventually, I started feeling bad and ended up going to the doctor after I discovered a rash on my body. The doctor informed

⁷⁶ www.en.oxforddictionaries.com (accessed March 29, 2019).

⁷⁷ Michael Rogness, “The Sabbath: Holy Time.” *Word & World*, 36 no 3, summer 2016, 285-291. <http://www.luthersem.edu/>. (accessed January 10, 2019).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

me I had shingles which forced me to stop and rest!”⁷⁹ Pastor “Naomi” is not alone. By their own admission, several of the pastors interviewed expressed feelings of burnout yet pushing themselves beyond their limits to continue working.

According to former pastor and self-care expert, Roy Oswald, “Burnout is a deeply religious issue because it forces us to confront how we perceive commitment to God and to the Kingdom.”⁸⁰ When pastors experience burnout, they are not useful to themselves, those they serve, and to the Kingdom of God. In fact, it may exhibit signs that they are experiencing a *messiah* complex as in the case of the Prophet Elijah. Dan Epp-Tiessen suggests, “Part of God’s response to the discouragement of Elijah is to provide for ongoing prophetic leadership so that Elijah will realize that not everything depends on him.”⁸¹ As difficult as it may be to accept especially when resources are lacking, African American pastors must realize the same, everything does not depend on them therefore there is not a justifiable reason for them not to practice Sabbath rest.

African American pastor and professor, Kirk Byron Jones proposes, “Sabbath time actually energizes us for more creative involvement in every area of life”. He adds, “I believe that observing a weekly Sabbath has strengthened me as a husband, father, pastor, and professor. Moreover, Sabbath helps me to have a healthy and holy appreciation of work.”⁸² A holy and healthy appreciation of themselves and of the work God has entrusted to pastors is what God

⁷⁹ Interview with “Naomi”, December 28, 2018.

⁸⁰ Roy Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding A Balance for Effective Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 71.

⁸¹ Dan Epp-Tiessen. “1 Kings 19: The Renewal of Elijah,” *Direction*, 35 no 1, September 2006, 33-43, <http://www.directionjournal.org/>. (accessed December 29, 2018).

⁸² Kirk Byron Jones, *Rest In The Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001), 44.

desires. This appreciation can be achieved through the practice of Sabbath, allowing oneself to stop doing and allowing oneself to experience a reflective state of being.

William Barclay indicates, “Men and women are not to be enslaved by the Sabbath; the Sabbath exists to make their lives better.”⁸³ For truly this is the blessing of the Sabbath which God modeled and spoke into existence in the beginning of time and is still speaking today. This blessing, this Sabbath rest we speak of is available to all including African American pastors. The key to them receiving it is acceptance, ceasing from doing and learning the art of being.

Project Outcomes

The sole project outcome is the design of a retreat specifically for African American pastors. Taking into consideration that most African American pastors and churches are unable to financially afford for the pastor to take a sabbatical of any length, the retreat would serve as an alternative. In the absence of a sabbatical, the retreat would be scheduled for 3 days (Wednesday to Friday) where pastors can convene quarterly for rest, restoration, and rejuvenation. At the pastor’s requests, the retreat will be held at a location outside of the immediate area but within driving distance which will help decrease the costs of travel. The retreat will consist of four main health components: physical, mental, spiritual and social. Based upon the expressed recommendations received from the pastors interviewed, the retreat would be designed as follows-

⁸³ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark with Introduction by John Drane* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 73.

	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Early Morning		Breakfast Available (7:30 to 9:00 am)	Breakfast Available (7:30 to 9:00 am)
Late Morning		Spiritual Activity: Theology of Self-Care Break	Physical Activity: Nature walk, yoga, swimming, jogging, dancing, or sleeping Break
Noonday		Lunch	Lunch
Late Afternoon	Arrival @ 3 pm Introduction to Retreat (housekeeping details)	Physical Activity: Nature walk, yoga, swimming, jogging, dancing, or sleeping	Spiritual Activity: Psychology of Self- Care (Healing Circle)
Evening	Guided Meditation on Sabbath Rest, Pt. 1 (Rabbi “Aaron”)	Guided Meditation on Sabbath Rest, Pt. 2 (Center for Jewish Studies)	Departure @ 5 pm
	Social Gathering	Social Gathering	
	Dinner	Dinner	
	Evening Worship	Evening Worship	

The purpose of the retreat is not to add to the busyness of the pastors. Instead the retreat is designed to cultivate rest, revitalization, collegiality, along with physical and mental health and well-being. The design of the retreat encompasses the four major areas (physical, mental, spiritual, and social) which the pastors interviewed requested the retreat to encompass. In addition to the specific activities outlined, sessions with a mental health professional as well as a Spiritual Director would be made available throughout the retreat until the time of departure.

Creating a space for pastors to practice Sabbath rest is the beginning phase of the adoption and implementation of self-care practices.

Self-Care Recommendations for African American Pastors

- Find an accountability partner who will hold you accountable for taking proper care of your body, mind, and spirit. If willing, have that person join you in signing a Self-Care Contract. A sample version can be found in Appendix B.
- Create for yourself a Self-Care Plan like the one I created in Appendix C.
- Take a minimum of two days off a week for Sabbath. These days should not include Saturday (sermon preparation) and Sunday (worship service).
- Get 6-8 hours a sleep per night.
- Eat 3 healthy meals a day and two snacks in between meals.
- Exercise 3-4 times a week for at least 20 minutes a day.
- Schedule regular physical exams with your primary health care physician.
- Learn to delegate tasks and responsibilities to others in the church.
- Schedule regular appointments with a mental health specialist. Pastors need someone to talk with and oftentimes, they are unable to be vulnerable with those around them. Seeking the services of a mental health professional is a sign of good health.
- One of the pastors interviewed shared that one of his self-care practices is a ritual he created which he performs every morning before he begins his day. This ritual gives him strength and grounding. He did not wish to share his personal ritual in writing but was willing to share elements of it which includes verses of Scripture, poetry, music, and prayer. As a result, I took the opportunity to create my own version and would encourage others to do so. Please see Appendix D.

Conclusion

Each pastor interviewed for this research is a tremendous gift to the Body of Christ. They are champions for change for those who are on the margins of society and have been deemed outcasts. They are respected preachers and pastors who serve the church and the community as leaders, scholars, counselors, mentors, and change agents. They are highly esteemed, and the breadth and depth of their ministerial reach is deep and wide. They are symbols of prophetic utterance and serve as sources of encouragement to those in their midst. To lose them prematurely to sickness and even death would not only be devastating to the Body of Christ, but it will also be devastating to the community-at-large, particularly, the African American community.

In the words inscribed on a Christmas card received in December 2018, written by a dear friend who is a Jesuit priest and who has experienced severe bouts of burnout himself, he writes, “God is here, but sometimes we are not. We sometimes are so preoccupied with the difficulties of living that we block the doors of God’s presence in the beauty of creation or in the beauty of finding God in one another.” The practice of Sabbath can draw us back to that place where God is calling us to be, that place where God is, that place where we are one with God, one with ourselves, and one with creation. God is calling us to cease from our endless **doing** and embrace the art of **being** present in God’s presence.

Appendix A

Interviews Questions for African American Pastors regarding African American Clergy Self-Care

1. How long have you been in ministry/pastoring?
- b. What is your educational level?
2. Are you a “full-time” Pastor or are you part-time, bi-vocational, or tri-vocational?
- b. How many hours a week do you work?
3. What is the size of your congregation?
4. Is your congregation located in the urban setting?
5. What is the racial, educational, and economic makeup of your congregation?
6. What are some of the pressures, demands, and/or expectations you experience as a Pastor?
7. What are some of the challenges you experience in ministry?
8. What type of ministry involvement do you have with the community in which your church resides?
9. Have you ever experienced burnout? If so, how have you recovered from it?
10. We all experience times when our spirits are down (even depressed). What strategies do you use, or have found effective in the past, when you experience dejection or despair in your ministry?
11. As a Pastor, do you feel you have collegial support?
12. Do you take time away from ministry to rest?
13. How do you balance being a Pastor with other demands/relationships/responsibilities in your life?
14. What, if any, spiritual practices do you practice as it relates to self-care?
15. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 = poor and 5 = excellent, how would you rate your weekly/monthly practice of self-care?

16. What is your hermeneutical interpretation of Exodus 20:8 which states us to “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy”?

17. Do you regularly practice Sabbath/Sabbath rest?

18. Do you believe African American Pastors experience more challenges in ministry than Pastors of other races? If so, why?

19. If there was a retreat created specifically for African American clergy centered on self-care, would you attend? If so, how would you like to see it structured?

20. How do you determine when you’re taking on too much?

21. What advice would you give to another pastor who is trying to avoid or recover from burnout?

Appendix B

Self-Care Contract

3 John 1:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in [good health](#), just as it is well with your soul.

On this day, Friday, January 11, 2019, I, _____, take full responsibility for developing myself into the healthy and whole person God created me to be. According to Scripture, I am confident that I am fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God and I acknowledge that God has a special plan and purpose for my life. I will make a difference in the kingdom of God and in the world by consistently remembering my importance in the earth. The gifts and talents that God has planted inside of me are: 1) _____, 2) _____, 3) _____. I believe that I am being called by God to put these gifts to use in order to better the Church and world in the following ways: 1)_____, 2)_____, 3)_____. Today, I boldly and unapologetically declare, “YES” to my creativity, uniqueness, and beauty. I tenaciously commit to a life of excellent self-care in order to give the best of myself to my vocation, relationship with God, my family, my friends, and others, my passions and my pursuits. I understand my body is the vehicle that transports my love, creativity and spirit to the world around me. I choose to support and maintain it to the best of my ability. Neglect is not an option. I refuse to fuel my self-care with shame, fear of not being worthy enough or other people’s opinions. I will commit to taking excellent care of myself regularly out of love and respect for the One who created me, for myself, my gifts and the vocation I’ve been called to and those I have been called to inspire.

I acknowledge that self-care includes but is not limited to: my response to the world around me, eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting adequate rest, enjoying fulfilling and nurturing

relationships, managing my stress, creating boundaries and expand comfort zones, being fully engaged with life, and being of service to God and others.

From this day forward, I promise to be good to my body, my mind, and my spirit, in good times and bad. I pledge to love, honor, cherish, and respect my body, my mind, and my spirit from this day forward and forevermore.

The most important step I can take today to administer a greater level of self-care is:

To make myself a priority!

And so, I begin...

Signature: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Note: Some aspects of this contract have been adopted from a self-care contract I completed and signed at Grace & Grit (<https://graceandgrit.com>).

Appendix C

Self-Care Plan

Habakkuk 2:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the **vision**; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

To aide African American Pastors in their self-care journey, the following chart has been created to assist them in establishing preliminary self-care goals for themselves. For some, writing the vision and making it plain will prove to be greatly beneficial.

Physical Goals 1. 2. 3.	Mental Health Goals 1. 2. 3.
Spiritual Goals 1. 2. 3.	Vocational Goals 1. 2. 3.
Financial Goals 1. 2. 3.	Educational Goals 1. 2. 3.
Recreational Goals 1. 2. 3.	Relationship Goals 1. 2. 3.

Appendix D

Ritual

Holy, holy, holy
 Lord, God Almighty
 Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee

Give us the bread we need for today.
 Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
 just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.
 And don't lead us into temptation,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

God of our weary years,
 God of our silent tears,
 thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
 thou who has by thy might,
 led us into the light,
 keep us forever in the path, we pray
 lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,
 lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,
 shadowed beneath the hand, may we forever stand, true to our God,
 True to our native land.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil; for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff—
 they comfort me

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows

Thy Kingdom come.
 Thy will be done in earth,
 As it is in heaven.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

For Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Songwriters: John B. Dykes / Reginald Heber / George S. Schuler
 Holy, Holy, Holy lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group

Songwriters: J. Rosamond Johnson / Weldon Johnson James
Lift Every Voice and Sing lyrics © Edward B Marks Music Company, Marks Edward B. Music Corp., Glorysound A Div. Of Shawnee Press Inc.

Matthew 6:11-13 (Common English Bible)
Psalm 23:4-5 (New Revised Standard Version)
Matthew 6:10 (Revised Standard Version)
Psalm 23:6 (New Revised Standard Version)
Matthew 6:13d (New King James Version)

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