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Reimagining Our Spirituality: Creating a Kingdom Culture In A Virtual Environment

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Abstract

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In 2020 the world was sent into an unplanned period of exile as it struggled to address the effects of a global pandemic. The swiftness of the paradigm shift left everyone scrambling to find alternative options for daily life activities. The church was uniquely impacted as its basic operational mode of assembly abruptly ceased to exist. This impact resonated even more profoundly in the Black Church, which engages in a highly interactive, intimate worship experience and approach to the formation of community both in a spiritual and ministry context. The prolonged exile from the normal patterns of engagement raised a theoretical question centered on the culture and complexities of community as defined within the Black Church context. Can a highly relational and emotional based body of believers particularly in the black church tradition, which is so deeply invested in the physical gathering space, engage a virtual space as a site for community building and spiritual formation? Would it be possible for the Black Church tradition to pivot from its ties to a physical building and develop options to traditional worship and traditional community building that would provide flexibility and still meet the needs of both its parishioners and the community? Indeed it is possible and this project through the exploration of the Black Church's definitions of spirituality and how it establishes its construct of community will present the argument that it is possible for the black church to reimagine community in the a way that will not only cause it to become more relevant but to also flourish as it redefines the kingdom through digital community spaces that broadens its connections and engagement to create a more inclusive and impactful culture in the kingdom.

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Introduction

Many churches claimed they would *never* go online/do bible study virtually, have social media pages, conduct business meetings via Zoom, or even attempt to recreate special days in the life of the church virtually. The very idea of moving beyond their current traditional delivery of the Sunday sermon and other ministries was not a consideration in their organizational planning and budget development. This attitude was particularly evident in the black church, where the worship experience is a community fellowship that relies heavily on the cadence of ‘Call and Response’ during worship and special events, or days is viewed as a time of communal fellowship. The church in this context has served throughout history as a gathering place: a space in which people of color could freely and authentically express themselves, gain encouragement from each other, and find strength to endure the social injustices and obstacles they faced in society.

What many of us thought was impossible or would only happen in the distant future, happened in the course of just a few days without warning. So many faith communities had to pivot quickly to continue to deliver worship in response to a virus that catapulted us into the unknown. In this ‘new normal,’ we are faced with the challenge of creating community in absentia. For the black church, this posed a particularly difficult question. How shall a congregation, particularly in the black church tradition, one which is so deeply invested in a physical worship gathering as a communal experience, engage virtual space as a site for community building and spiritual formation? How might worship and small group gatherings change in the virtual space that will define and develop community in a new context? Is it possible for the black church to have flexibility and offer options to traditional worship and traditional community building that still meet the needs of our parishioners?

In fact, it is possible for the black church to survive and become more relevant. I will present the argument that the black church can indeed flourish by reimagining digital community spaces which enable engagement and connection. Community exists when individual can engage in social interaction that builds a personal connection with their faith and each other. These digital spaces can create personal connections in a convenient and accessible environment; they also expand the reach of the church into new areas and opportunities for engagement and results in the ultimate increased inclusion and increased impact of the ministry of the kingdom.

In order to explore this potential digital space, it is necessary to undertake a critical examination of the current worship practices of predominantly African American congregations, placing those practices within the current seismic shift into virtual worship. Following that discussion, this paper will then examine the concept of spirituality as understood in the post-modern context as a way of establishing individual spirituality within the new landscape of pandemic-driven shifts in delivery of spiritual content. Finally, this paper will examine the planning, execution, and assessment of innovative virtual community spaces at Mt. Zion AME. These spaces demonstrate the way in which one church has confronted the challenge of creating a set of 'new normal' practices that will allow the church to remain viable. In fact, by learning how to cultivate digital presence, Mt. Zion AME was able to become more relevant, cultivating an evangelistic reach beyond their current demographics. As will be seen at Mt. Zion AME, it is critical that the post-pandemic church must learn to experience God outside of traditional norms of religiosity. Indeed, this shift was a reminder that the church is called into the world, not into the building.

Congregational Context: Mt. Zion AME

I serve as the pastor Mt. Zion AME, a traditional mainline denominational predominantly African American congregation in the metropolitan Atlanta area. As an Itinerant Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, we are assigned annually to our charge for a one-year term. I arrived at Mt. Zion in June 2019 and found a congregation that had gone through a period of both economic and numerical depression for several years. The congregation was displaced during the expansion of Atlanta Hartsfield Jackson Airport from their previous location in College Park in 2001. Following the selling of their property to the airport authority, the congregation entered a transitory period in which they rented various locations while seeking a permanent location to purchase. From the history relayed to me by the congregation, during this time they went through a change in leadership due to the re-assignment of their long-term pastoral leader.

During this transition period, Mt. Zion had several short-term pastoral leaders who served for less than two years. As a result, they never were able to come to any final resolution of their temporary location status and continue to relocate to various temporary sites for a period that extended from their anticipated one-year period to one of over five years. This relocation and subsequent period of ‘wandering’ in the desert of uncertainty and temporary status resulted in a very gradual but impactful decline of the once thriving congregation of several hundred members to a remnant of approximately sixty members, as others sought a more stable worship environment as the temporary status of the church appeared to have no end. This period was very traumatic and impactful for the congregation at Mt. Zion; many of the current members still refer to this period as one of disengagement, discouragement, and despair. The effects still resonate in the life of the church as they subconsciously approach their current challenges with a very

defeated outlook. Mt Zion AME Church was no different. This traditional congregation which has existed for over 100 years was very connected to its physical worship space. Pews were labeled with metal plates reminding the membership of who had donated that special place to sit and hear the word, windows contained ancestral names of current members as a memorial of their service and longevity of membership. When I arrived at Mt. Zion AME Church in June of 2019, I initiated the normal pattern of taking a 'look and see' approach to several aspects of the church for the first year, while sharing my vision of ministry with the congregation to secure their support. Because this congregation had struggled with a loss of membership and various financial challenges, they were hesitant to embrace quickly new and innovative ideas. They had been in a maintenance mode for the past five years and needed to see the possibilities of the future and their ability to make those possibilities a reality.

This congregation is a model of the traditional black church, centered on the weekly Sunday worship experience and mid-week bible study. Programming focused on the traditional celebratory days of worship in the Black Church tradition such as Men's Day, Women's Day, and Church Anniversary which not only offer opportunities to highlight the current membership but also serve as critical components of the church's fundraising efforts. These programs lacked any significant and or impactful outreach component and, as a result, the increased number of attendees at these events did not translate into higher overall membership. These events were thus not evangelistic in their purpose. While there were other opportunities to create community within the church, such as movie night, youth activities, game night, all these events cultivated an internal community, singularly comprised of those that gathered weekly in worship.

The Black Church and Digital Space

Despite these challenges, the black church tradition is no stranger to digital programming. In fact, one of the most cited positive advantage of the shift to a virtual experience is that every church can now become a mega-church with the same advantages. In particular, as Pamela Martin suggests, “Black mega-churches have been able to use their websites to offer all the benefits from their conventional atmosphere of religious worship and spiritual enlightenment to the rest of the world.”¹ This is possible, of course, because of “the flexibility, sophistication, and ingenuity” of twenty-first century online technology. Martin reminds us that “with the convenience and control of being a part of a virtual, churchgoing community, people seeking religious experiences via Black mega-church websites have access to the same information, services, entertainment, products, and theological teachings.”²

In this way, the virtual experience can level the playing field for churches that previously were unable to offer programming comparable to mega-churches. That programming is not limited to the worship experience. Indeed, Martin furthers offer additional commentary about black church traditions such as mid-week bible study and its focus on youth development stating, “we are the last revolutionaries in America. If we fail to leave a legacy for our children, we have failed our mission and should be dismissed”, not with just biblical knowledge but also with knowledge that will enable them to navigate the injustices within society.”³ The mid-week bible study offers the Black church opportunities to empower its audience with scriptural knowledge

¹ Martin, Pamela P., Tuere A. Bowles, LaTrese Adkins, and Monica T. Leach. “Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts.” *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2012): 155–176. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43525418>.

² Martin, Bowles, Adkins and Leach, “Black Mega Churches,” 157.

³ Martin, Bowles, Adkins and Leach, “Black Mega Churches,” 167.

that will give the strength and encouragement to press forward in a world that presents many challenges. Those challenges are both universal, such as finances and family dynamics, but also specific to the black community: those challenges that are unique to their very defining characteristic of being Black in America. Bible studies thus provide biblical knowledge that allows contemporary believers to locate themselves within the very scriptures that for many years was used to justify the enslavement of their ancestors. These same scriptures can now provide strength to face continuing instances of racism, social biases and the effects of a social system that still seems to marginalize their full existence as a human being. For the black church, a mid-week fueling is essential: a means of guaranteeing that members will make it until another Sunday to experience the spirituality that sustains them.

In addition to bible studies, the black church's spiritual practices are deeply embedded within its physical worship experience and the gathering of the community for worship. Michael Battle notes that "the Black Church's essence of its spirituality has always been about finding healthy patterns of community. God's image is community rather than individualistic."⁴ This unique context of the Black Church presents additional challenges to its leadership as it plots the course to respond to the 'new normal': facing corporate worship as it emerges slowly from the pandemic shuttering of its physical worship spaces. The black church's engagement turns on its creation of community, from the common prayer arising from the African American Hymns which stirs the gathered community singing 'Somebody prayed for me, had me on their mind, took the time to pray for me'. For African Americans, the church has long been the place of refuge and restoration for the spiritual strengthening of its people in times of turmoil, torment,

⁴ Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 2.

and tenuous personal challenges. People of faith gather to draw strength from each other, to give witness to their voices that are silenced in other settings and to acknowledge and affirm each other. The beloved community “creates and sustains their virtues and allows the gospel to be social as well as personal’ it gives a future hope in a present dilemma and provides spirituality that is person focused.”⁵ This sense of community that emanates from the worship experience and the energy, ‘moving of the spirit’ is heralded in its very songs and praises: “Every Time I Feel the Spirit”. This reliance on the community to empower individual spiritual connection with God is central the worship experience in the Black church. Community creates the spirituality that is unique to the Black Church experience.

The statistical data supports these descriptions of the community that is central to black church experiences. A Pew Research survey looking at faith among Black Americans found that most Black Americans who attend religious services go to congregations where most of the other attendees and the senior clergy are Black. They cite many reasons for this sense of connection: such as the ability of the congregations to address the distinctive needs and concerns of Black Americans, the congregation as a provider of familiar rituals, worship styles and music, the congregation as a shelter from discrimination and a place to feel at home (community) and as a link to the history and struggles of Black Americans. Respondents provided additional insights such as, “We are still human, but we still do things differently” or “When it comes to music, it’s about our struggle,..... so we bring it out in expressions of music. We sing hard. We sing

⁵ Battle, *The Black Church*, 134.

powerful.”⁶ The ability to closely identify creates a familiarity and continuity, tying generations together thus creating community.

Although this community is essential to the black church experience, there were pre-pandemic challenges to that community. The black church was already wrestling with the loss of membership, especially within the age groups of the Gen-z’s and Millennials; this shift to virtual worship has only made it a more glaring concern. But new emphasis on virtual engagement gives hope to this challenge as Marla Frederick notes,

The Black churches have witnessed a decline in youth participation, reflected in a decrease in general church participation, an increase in ‘religious nones’ as well as a movement of young people away from traditional African-inspired religious traditions to more multi-racial churches. Yet online church serves as a way of recapturing the imagination of young people, a younger generation that desires to be active participants in an online church focused on the social justice arm of ministry. Chat rooms in Zoom have changed the way top-down ministry is performed...co-creating the learning experience with a push for greater engagement of the church on issues that are important to them.⁷

There are many elements of online worship experiences that appeal to younger generations of the black church: alternative times of worship, shortened worship services, pre-recorded services available to watch on demand, and worship that reaches out to them instead of worship that requires them to come in. I do not have all the answers but through this research it is the desired outcome that an innovative roadmap will develop that harnesses the power and flexibility of technology and provide those still waiting for the return to normal with a path to a new normal.

⁶ Mohanem Besheer, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamant and Claire Gecewicz, “Focus groups: A look at how Black Americans talk about ‘Black churches.’ Pew Research Center. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/focus-groups-a-look-at-how-black-americans-talk-about-black-churches>

⁷ Marla Frederick, “Debate: Reflections on COVID- 19: COVID-19, Religious Markets and the Black Church, *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 11, (2020): 190. <https://doi:10.3167/arrs.2020.110114>.

In addition to digital worship spaces, the black church has also explored incorporating social media into their worship was being contemplated as a means to appeal to a mostly younger generation and a possible solution to the loss of millennial age worshippers. Black mega-churches in particular have capitalized on the social media engagement, “utilizing it to reach its goals of increasing church attendance, reaching larger and larger audiences, they invested in online outreach to bring the Gospel message to individuals beyond the confines of local geography.”⁸ This form of outreach has resulted in an attraction of Millennials and Gen Z worshippers, even as this age group has become less religious over time. Black Millennials (49%) and members of Generation Z (46%) are twice as likely to say they seldom or never attend religious services.⁹

For smaller to mid-sized congregations, there was limited current use of some social media as part of their services, usually as an afterthought and not as a central focus of their worship planning and delivery. This limited usage in most instances was based on lack of financial resources and personnel to staff a robust media ministry. Some churches were using Facebook Live on a limited basis omitting all the service components and only broadcasting the actual sermon delivery. This limited usage left out critical elements of the worship experience that invites the individual participant to enter into a spiritual communal relationship with others who are viewing the worship experience virtually. Within the Black Church in particular, the interactive and communal elements of the elements of worship such as fervent prayer, scripture readings, and singing. All of these interactive moments contribute to ‘setting the atmosphere’, which is necessary to create a high spiritual engagement with the message and with each other.

⁸ Martin, Bowles, Adkins and Leach, “Black Mega Churches in the Internet Age,” 157.

⁹ Besheer, Cox, Diamant and Gecewicz, “Focus Groups,”.

Community and Spirituality

How, then, might the black church designed to cultivate a digital community that cultivates spirituality? A virtual community space, by definition, operates outside of the normal patterns of a gathered worshipping community. As Howard Thurman noted, there are dangers to this kind of innovation: “those who set off in search of new spiritual territory have felt like they have left Jesus behind, since church teaching has convinced them that Jesus belongs to the church.”¹⁰ In the black church context, spirituality is a shared experience that comes to a realized culmination through moments of worship which invokes the emotionalism associated with the Black Church worship experience, such as call and response. Black church worship creates a unique exchange that Neichelle Guidry Jones states arises from “an intentional resonance between the aspects of the service and the attendees that crescendos to the preaching moment creating an element that bind the service together creating one extended moment of divine time.”¹¹ In her study of the Call and Response worship style of the Black church, Richards-Greaves similarly suggests the experience is based on verbal and non-verbal exchanges between the pew and pulpit with inclusion of the music song by the choir, referred to as “having church”: “the call and response is noticeable, pervasive and crucial in just about every expression and performance throughout the course of the Black Church service.”¹² How then will the spirit be stirred in a digital space without any verbal exchange? How will spirituality arise when community is not gathering together in person to call and quicken the spirit of each other?

¹⁰ Greg Ellison, *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 33

¹¹ Neichelle R. Guidry Jones, “Good Worship.” *Liturgy* 29, no. 2 (2014): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2014.867140>.

¹² Gillian R. Richards-Greaves, “‘Say Hallelujah, Somebody’ and ‘I Will Call upon the Lord’: An Examination of Call-and-Response in the Black Church,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 3 (2016): 193.

The post-modern concept of ‘spiritual but not religious’ may be a critical component of the ‘new normal’ for worship. In his work on the emergence of contemporary spirituality, David Tracey describes this move to embrace “spiritual” rather than “religious” experiences as a move away from viewing the individual as an efficient machine. Furthermore, Tracey notes the shift has also been pushed forward by a believe that “spiritual life is no longer confined to a religious group! There is no membership required to relate to the spirit!”¹³ The black church must, then seize the opportunity that has been handed to it in the midst of the unexpected and unanticipated upheaval of the pandemic. So many churches have been, as Tracey describes, “ stuck between the comfortability of what was and the potential of what can be; we have outgrown our current praxis as likened unto a pair of our favorite clothing item that no longer fits but we struggle to let them go and begin to wear the new clothing item. In fact, the church might be best served by openly admitting that “ the birth of the new has never been easy and our experiences testify to the agony and disruption of changing times.”¹⁴

Such growth does not require the church to abandon the worship space, which is central to the black church and Mt Zion AME Church as the core of its community. Rather, a shift in methodology and doctrine might allow us to reimagine the worship experience within the context of church traditions . Historically, the emphasis of church programming has been on “saving souls” or conversion. As L. Edward Phillips notes “there must be a shift from conversion and the view by those who focus on spirituality that the church makes them feel guilty, is money focused, boring and predictable.”¹⁵ This leaves individuals who have abandoned the traditional

¹³ David Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution the Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 1.

¹⁴ Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 2.

¹⁵ L. Edward Phillips, *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship* (Nashville, Tn : Abingdon Press, 2020), 57.

religious model for the perceived freedom of being spiritual, with the overwhelming feeling that the institutional church doesn't meet their needs.

So how should the church approach this reimagining of Spirituality to eliminate the preconceived notions that abound about the God of the existing religious structures as a God that is remote, detached, and insensitive? In part by reframing the understanding of the divine to embrace a God that connects our spirituality to a more intimate and intense source, one that is liberating instead of confining. We must allow the open worship environment that has been created become our new platform for engaging others in the work of the kingdom. We must ask the hard questions and deal with the hard bits of spirituality that seem to dissuade non-traditionalist from embracing the religiosity of worship such as sacrifice, discipline commitment and dedication to others that per Tacey, leads others to 'Popular Spirituality': which is about taking what we can 'get' from the spirit in a worldly fashion that is not always spiritual but can be considered easier than the constraints of religiosity.¹⁶

As we reimagine our spirituality, we must also be willing to tackle the criticisms of the post-modern spiritual movement. We must be willing to examine with a close and critical lens the microcosms that operate within the physical religious institutions that we left behind. Tacey reminds of this need by questioning our motives for quickly seeking to return to what was the past tense by asking "returning to what? We are not necessarily returning to the churches but to something basic within us that we are not yet willing to let go of."¹⁷ We must acknowledge that what was, is no and while it is the known of our past, the present presents new opportunities worthy of the risk of exploration. Perhaps this will invite us to avoid operating as spiritual

¹⁶ Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 141.

¹⁷ Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 131.

niches. Instead, the church must be willing to go where people actually are, whether that is online, in chat rooms or blogs. Worship must be transformational and address the needs of faith and spirituality in daily life. As Phillips reminds us, new practices must be developed with a reflective approach that models personal engagement in the lived daily lives of people who are concerned about jobs, family, finances and surviving in the world.¹⁸ Our focus must be on faith formation versus recycling church teachings that are remote and removed from the current struggles faced each day by those who are seeking answers and encouragement from a place they may not be able to name but know that they cannot do it by themselves. We have the opportunity to show that while being spiritual for many has been a badge of liberation from the limiting doctrine of the church as known. Indeed, the challenge of the pandemic also provided new opportunities to reconnect to the basis of that spirituality which connects all human beings to God, doing so in a new context that puts community at the center of its praxis.

¹⁸ Phillips, *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship*, 173, 186, 197.

Innovation: *iExperience* at Mt. Zion AME

Phase One: Visioning

So, then how to begin this work within this new and mostly uncharted territory? The preliminary groundwork for this innovation began in the months leading up to the pandemic and without knowledge of the critical framework it would provide to us. During the planning stage, leadership of the congregation gathered for a vision board session. The planning team of twenty-one people consisted of leaders of ministry organizations and ministerial staff members. Everyone was randomly placed into groups; each group had the opportunity to rotate through the various designated circles (*Spiritual Growth, Church Growth, Stewardship, Community Outreach and Worship*). (Appendix A) These circles were selected because they represented the key missional components of a thriving congregation incorporating discipleship, evangelism, resource management and worship. Each member was asked to give their input into what actions each circle represented or meant to them by writing them within the circle. The input from the circles was utilized to determine the vision and future direction for the ministry. The elements of these five circles centered on those areas that the planning group felt was key to revitalizing the church and creating a vibrant and vital ministry outline for the church.

The *spiritual growth* vision circle centered on the foundation of the believer's faith in which we are called to study the word of God to gain knowledge and become equipped to share the good news with others as a means of propagating the Christian faith. Providing a plan of varied programming that gives opportunities to expand access to Christian educational experiences enables the church to grow in knowledge and empowers them to then become effective witnesses to others. The process of *spiritual growth* propels the church into the second vision circle of *church growth*, by allowing them to see the potential and power of their witness to others. This

witness is not just limited to sharing the word but also by their physical witness in activities that extend the tenets of the Christian faith to the community demonstrating their concern and care for the well-being of the community. The goals of the *church growth* circle would be achieved through an organized media campaign to evangelize the community to include social media platforms, increasing visibility by connecting with other faith organizations and community groups and providing services to the community that strengthen the community's viability.

The third vision circle centers on *stewardship* which encompasses our responsibility and accountability to be true to the faith we profess. To believe God is able to provide above and beyond our abilities and our resources with confidence and obedience to the word of God. While this belief is built on the responsible utilization of our time, talents, and treasure; it also speaks to our individual accountability to properly manage our resources such as our personal finances, physical health, and personal relationships. The goals of the *stewardship* circle would be achieved through targeted empowerment workshops dealing with personal finances, health disparities, conflict resolution, and leadership training.

The fourth vision circle expands on earlier circles by specifically addressing *community outreach* as not only a component of our faith which charges us to go into the world and share with others through our witness the good news of the saving grace of Jesus but also to demonstrate it by our actions of feeding the homeless, clothing the naked and thereby extending the same grace and mercy that we have received to others. The goals of the *community outreach* circle would be achieved through the formation of a non-profit for the church to provide community development programs such as after-school care, summer camps, tutorial programs, GED programs, community health services and other services that enrich and empower the community. Through connections with local schools, apartment complexes and local community

businesses a strategic effort of capacity building through grants and other funding opportunities would be aggressively engaged to build capacity to expand these critical services.

The final vision circle is the *worship* circle, placed last in the list of circles intentionally as a marker of its centrality to current church culture. Mt. Zion AME Church-College Park engaged in this visioning process to not only formulate their path forward in ministry but to also shift their focus from an inward approach to ministry that was solely focused on the Sunday worship experience and no activity beyond that one day per week. While the *worship* experience is a critical component of the life of the church, it had become the singular function of the church and thereby stunting the growth of the church in other areas as they failed to see their primary Christian function as one of service to others.

To shift this focus, the goals of the worship circle included an intentional planning of worship that would become inclusive of all and make space for those who may not be traditional participants in worship. Olu Brown states “ Churches often make the mistake of planning worship inside their four walls and, without any ill intent and consequently plan worship for the people they currently see and not those they hope to see...local churches aren’t thriving because they are not thinking outreach through worship. Instead, they are thinking in-reach, and consequently have become country clubs for Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ The question of how to reach those outside the walls of the church and extend a welcoming hospitality to the stranger among us became the thread that is woven into all worship planning.

¹⁹ Olu Brown, *4D Impact : SmashBarriers like a Smart Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 102-103.

Phase Two: Redirection

Three months after this community vision was designed, we entered the pandemic. This visioning work and the input from the members during that visioning session was instrumental to providing a clear direction forward during an otherwise time of uncertainty. A follow-up session was hosted via Zoom after nine months of pandemic church closure in which breakout rooms for each circle was assigned. The vision for that circle was shared with the group. The group was then charged with designing a method of achieving the vision in the current state of the church. The overall group took a strategic analytical assessment of the church's current capacity to address the original five vision circles that were developed prior to the church closure as a result of the pandemic.

While it was agreed that all the circles represented important areas of focus for the church, the focus shifted to which vision circles could be adapted most effectively into a virtual format while also incorporating some of the goals of other circles into that particular vision circle. Mutual consensus was reached for the church's efforts to center on the *worship* circle and *community outreach* circle, since through these two circles the church would be able to maintain its viability and visibility both internally and externally. Elements of the other circles such as, study of the word, Sunday School and prayer found in the *spiritual growth* circle along with empowerment workshops and fellowship opportunities outside of the church found in the *stewardship circle* could be incorporated into the worship and community outreach circles. This consolidation while not as robust as the original plan would provide us with a roadmap to still implement the vision of the circles in a modified virtual format.

The iExperience innovation emerged from those follow-up sessions as well as through aided by interviews conducted with various pastors and church leaders as part of this project that

have and are embracing this new frontier.²⁰ First, I spoke with Susan H. Buckson who serves as senior Pastor of Allen Temple AME Church (Atlanta, Georgia). Allen Temple is an established denominational church in existence for over 100 years with a membership comprised of 80% of the members over the age of 55 situated in a very economically depressed area of west Atlanta. I then spoke with Orlando Evans, who at that time was serving on the ministerial staff of Impact Church (a UMC congregation located in East Point, Georgia). Impact is a church founded on the motto of “Doing Church Differently” and this has guided their mindset since its founding in 2016. This approach to ministry is especially significant as Evans shared their strategy during this pandemic phase of worship and community engagement.

In particular, Evans noted that “this paradigm shift will not be a temporary one but one that will guide the delivery of ministry going forth.” It is his opinion that ministry must shift to a focus of being content creators similar to what is found in other visual content delivery models. He notes in particular that this kind of spiritual connect “involves setting up the worship experience even prior to the actual event to develop an anticipation for the experience by sharing via social media platforms with video clips of prior services in which the invitation to join the next session is extended. Further promoting the worship experience after the fact by taking video clips of the worship experience to invite the potential audience to view the entire experience on the varied social media platforms.” Additionally, Buckson shared that “you must reevaluate the ministry experience from beginning to end and go beyond the current moment, what does your current membership look like and what do you desire your membership to look like? This is how you move to the next level in the worship experience.”

²⁰ The results of those interviews are summarized in *Appendix A* and with significant narrative shared below Powers, Esther K. *How to Reimagine Our Spirituality in a Virtual Environment. Personal Interviews: Evans, Orlando (Impact Church), Susan Buckson (Allen Temple AME), 2021.*

These important points were critical to developing the delivery for the *iExperience* worship component by making the necessary modifications to transition a previously in person and real time experience to one that was based on a purely visual and virtual audience. Instead of just turning on a phone camera to record in person content, we made an intentional analysis of what was effective and appropriate for a virtual audience that would be engaging in the worship experience as we migrated to a totally virtual delivery. Also, critical to structuring our iExperience community component was Evans's observations on shifting from the mindset of a church to a community organization. He states

“you must stop thinking like a church but more as a nonprofit helping people. It is less about getting people into the physical building but to see ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ and not just about backs and butts in the seats. Our focus should be not to just reach people in the church but those who are even unchurched. We must approach it not about a denominational conversion but a conversion to become disciples for Christ. We should incorporate images and information about our outreach during giving moments, share the story and allow opportunities to share testimonials of hope from volunteers to serve as an impactful message to others viewing our virtual platforms and invite them to get engaged in these activities.”

Buckson concurs but reminded us, “you must have realistic expectations and continue to press forward whether or not your initial engagement is successful. You reassess, restructure and relaunch, this is a necessity as many times those in the community are either unaware or have become desensitized to their own needs and problems. Develop a variety of programming options as it creates interest with those that you are seeking to serve, once you can engage them in one area, you can then begin to broaden your delivery of other programs that will meet needs that they were not even aware they needed.”

As a result, Mt. Zion shares all our iExperience community engagement events whether delivered in-person, virtual or delivered both in-person and virtual (our hybrid model). Because of the modified focus emphasized in this interview, we now evaluate all our events to maximize the hybrid delivery of our programming as we have begun the transition back offering in-person

and virtual delivery due to the gradual relaxation in COVID protocols, realizing that this delivery model will remain in effect based on the permanent shift in the expectations of society. In approaching religious change Tacey reminds us to question what are we returning to: “not doctrines and structures or old religious forms but a basic and primal need to recover what is disappearing.”²¹ Even now we have begun the transition back to an in-person delivery of our experiences, we must face this challenge of returning to an ineffective model of comfort that was already exhibiting its ineffectiveness.

To continue to engage in building community even now requires us to not abandon the lessons learned during the last two years but continue to incorporate the innovative strategies of virtual worship into a hybrid model that meets both the needs of returning congregations and those in the community who will not return along with those who fail to see the relevancy of organized religion. The culmination of this work has resulted in the iExperience Project.

Phase Three: Implementation

The iExperience Project developed after a critical analysis of the vision circles and assessing the resources available to us during the limitations of operating within the restrictions of global the pandemic protocols. The iExperience movement is created to holistically equip the members of Mt. Zion to not only deepen their personal relationships with Jesus Christ, but to also serve as true disciples of Christ outside of the four walls of the building. This includes pouring into the surrounding community with inclusiveness (the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or

²¹ Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 131.

marginalized, such as those having physical or mental disabilities or belonging to other minority groups) with the love that Christ continues to grace us with. This inclusiveness extends to those that are unchurched and those that fail to see organized religion as relevant to current issues and socio-economic concerns. In this season of ‘church not as usual’ we have seen all normal modes and mediums of worship and ministry come to a dramatic and abrupt halt. We have been challenged to discover the true basics of ministry by focusing on Jesus-as-Human-Exemplar to meet people at their point of need.²²

iExperience is a re-envisioning of worship utilizing small groups both virtually and in-person. *iExperience* is not limited to the online platform but can be delivered in a hybrid format that provides access to both a virtual and in person audience. *iExperience* operates on the premise that utilization of the online mediums of live streaming via Facebook Live, YouTube, Instagram and other platforms simply provides an additional campus for the in-person church to present the message and ministry of Jesus Christ which casting a wider net of engagement. We have piloted a number of projects within the *iExperience* innovation, including but not limited to: *iExperience* Prayer which provides a wider and more accessible engagement opportunity to bring spiritual encouragement to others through weekly prayer rooms and calls via Zoom; *iExperience* Word on Wednesday which digitizes our weekly bible study enabling individuals to engage wherever they may be via teleconference and Zoom; *iExperience* Gen Now is our youth experience in which various opportunities for engagement takes place both virtually and in-person creating a hybrid delivery vehicle and finally, *iExperience* Connection which connects participants to opportunities for personal growth with financial knowledge, health and wellness topics, social justice and civic engagement. (Appendix B)

²² Ellison, *Anchored in the Current*, 33.

As I demonstrated earlier, worship is a central component of the black church's community and spirituality. Thus, the centerpiece of our *iExperience* project is worship, which we have designed to maximize personal engagement. We did this first by assigning a minister of engagement who will be responsible for monitoring the online chat with interaction via live chat with the virtual attendees who log on for worship. Additionally, Zoom and Facebook rooms are used to simulate the in-person worship experience by providing several options to our online congregation. A virtual lobby is created in the rooms to provide opportunities for pre-worship gathering in which members and visitors are welcome by our minister of engagement, allowing them to build community and feels a personal connection to those they will be worshipping with virtually. These rooms are also utilized post-worship to allow the pastor to spend time greeting the virtual visitors and members after the worship experience giving them the same access to pastoral leadership that in person attendees experience.

During the worship experience participants are encouraged to engage in the traditional call and response of the Black church by putting their expressions of spiritual joy in the chat in the form of emojis, hitting the like and heart button, making comments such as they would in the physical worship space. When the call is issued by the preacher they are encouraged to respond with their comments of "Amen" and emojis that reflect praise and agreement. The rooms are open during service to serve as sacred space for individual to engage in corporate and intercessory prayer. The online minister of engagement monitors the sacred space room during worship and when notification is received that someone has entered the room, the minister of engagement enters the room to address the needs or concerns of the worship participant. During the post-worship time, the room serves as place where those desirous of answer the call to discipleship can meet with either the minister of engagement or Pastor to acknowledge their desire of conversion or membership.

Another key component of the *iExperience* project has been the community engagement component which, as discussed, is essential to the black church, providing services that bring justice and equity to the beloved community. In direct response to the challenges and impact of COVID 19 pandemic, the church responded in a bold and aggressive manner during this unprecedented social crisis to meet the needs of those it was called to serve. Through the formation of a non-profit entity, Mt Zion has been able to make this component a living and vibrant part of their ongoing ministry experience by answering the call to service amid a global pandemic.

iExperience Community began with the formation of a non-profit entity, ServFirst, Inc. in June of 2020. This unprecedented decision to reach out to the community while other businesses and individuals were sheltering in place was a response to an urgent need in the community by responding to food insecurity of families and children that no longer had access to school nutritional programs. Families that were negatively impacted by jobs that were closed and awaiting the distribution of unemployment benefits for some, but for many who were underemployed in service related jobs there would be no unemployment benefits. Through partnership with the United States Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, we were able to distribute free boxes of fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and meats to families in need in the community each week.

Additionally, through a grant opportunity with United Way of Atlanta, Choose Healthy Life we were able to host COVID-19 testing for the community and when the vaccines were approved, we were able to add COVID-19 vaccinations to our community programming. As we moved forward in our engagement we continued to utilize the MAP-IT community analysis framework methodology to both plan and assess and implement our various programmatic

thrusters. While the MAP-IT (Mobilize, Assess, Plan, Implement and Track) methodology was formed to help public health professionals create health communities, it has also been adopted by community changemakers to implement a plan to that is tailored to the needs of the community while utilizing available assets.

This analysis model was a key driver in the next community engagement initiative which was creating a virtual learning site for community children as they prepared to return to school in the Fall of 2021 in a totally virtual learning environment. ServFirst Virtual Learning Academy was launched on August 1, 2021, to provide a safe learning environment for children who had limited to no access to internet services and no parental supervision at home to insure a high level of engagement in the virtual learning process. During this time many of the parents in the community working in service- related jobs were required to return to work, not by choice but by necessity as stated below this labor segment contained a large percentage of the underemployed who did not qualify for any unemployment assistance and found themselves with the choice to either work or have no income.

We were also able to partner with Bright from the State and the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) who were offering special financial support for students enrolled in virtual learning through approved sites. SOLVE (Supporting Onsite Learning for Virtual Education) provided access to childcare funding options for students aged 5-12 during this time. While the need for this program has significantly decreased, the school continues to serve a limited number of students for the current 2021-2022 school year, who have chosen to continue to access this option. The virtual learning academy has now transitioned to a learning academy providing summer camps, before and after school care and a site for pre-k learning in addition to the remaining virtual learning students.

The final area of the community programming that is actively engaged is the virtual platform which provides ongoing educational and empowerment seminars for a wide audience, all of whom can access these sessions live or through recordings. While this delivery model was driven by the radical shift to the virtual environment in response to the pandemic, it is one that has proven successful by meeting a critical void in traditional in person sessions. With the varied work schedules and other demands on the time of individual within the community this delivery model gives the option of real time engagement or engagement at the convenience of the intended audience.

In addressing the specific needs of the Black community, the premise that knowledge is power, and the lack of knowledge is a driving factor in our untimely demise. The ability to provide the knowledge regarding health disparities, financial inequities, family dynamics, educational inequities is critical to the empowerment of the community we serve. To date, seminars on Black men health concerns such as prostate cancer screening, colorectal cancer screening and hypertension have been offered. Seminars that cross all gender and age categories but speak specifically to the beloved community we serve such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and healthy eating have been conducted with successful engagement as outlined in the following assessment segment of this paper. Financial literacy seminars offered have addressed the areas of budgeting, understanding the rules of money and investments that will help improve the financial inequities and bring stability to the individual participants and the community at large. This component of *iExperience* is an ongoing response to the call of the Jesus to provide for those in need in Matthew 25: 31-46 and the founding scripture of our non-profit found in Mark 9:35, which calls us to be servants of other first and through our actions we are to go into the world demonstrating the care, concern and compassion for others that is our mandate as disciples of Christ. Community engagement provides a tangible response to the call and provides

opportunities to expand the scope of the defined community geographically for greater impact with increased outcomes to positively sustain and empower the community.

The MAP-IT framework not only provided a basis for assessing the needs of the community and taking the input from our church leadership's vision circles to implement the plans for the iExperience project, but it also provides a guide to track our progress toward meeting the ongoing needs of the community to capitalize on the project's vision.²³ Tracking our engagement levels and attendance provided us with a snapshot of the success of this component of the iExperience project. Looking at the implementation goals allows us to adjust when necessary to insure that we are still meeting our intended goals and pivot when current activities are no longer effective such as we demonstrated by the shift in delivery with the virtual learning academy.

When the local schools began the current school year with students returning to the classroom and our attendance numbers began to decline, we re-assessed the needs of the community and shifted to modify our services to include before and after school care along with pre-k in person learning while still maintaining the virtual learning space with a reduced capacity to align with the current reality of the community needs. Also with our weekly food distribution, the access to the USDA program was declining due to political restraints, so we pivoted and developed local connections with two providers, Fountain of Hope and The King's Table that enabled us to continue to meet the documented needs of the community. The success of this component has resulted in a trackable progress of being selected by the United Way of Greater Atlanta to serve as part of the Greater Atlanta Equity Alliance in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta because of our community impact. We statistically

²³ Community Tool Box, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/overview/models-for-community-health-and-development/map-it/main>.

track and monitor our progress to determine if additional strategies and action steps are needed to achieve the desire vision and outcomes of the *iExperience* project.

Conclusion

As we forge ahead into the new normal, we must not be in such a rush to return to the old normal, those things that we already knew were not working for the body of Christ. We have been given a possible once in a lifetime opportunity to revamp and rework our delivery of the fundamental spiritual foundation of religion; “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ We have a new medium to do a ‘new thing’ in the kingdom! By addressing the challenges and developing a new and innovative worship platform we can now access all the nations that was once unattainable when we were confined to the traditional concept of worship and spirituality.

Religiosity and spirituality can once again occupy the same but very different virtual space that has been created by us, not of our own planning but planned by God and it is for such a time as this that we must move forward and actively embrace the new thing that we perceive and receive it as the great awakening to a new environment. This proves that it is indeed possible for the Black church to reimagine digital community spaces that will enable it to not only survive but thrive as a reinvigorated and relevant propagator of spirituality.

²⁴ *New Interpreter's Study Bible: NRSV with Apocrypha, New Interpreter's Study Bible: NRSV with Apocrypha* (Nashville , Tn: Abingdon P., 2003), Chap. 28:19.

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Appendix A

Summary of Personal Interviews: Evans, Orlando (Impact Church) and Susan Buckson (Allen Temple AME), 2021. Interviews for Innovation Project

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be Content Creators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Manageable segments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Available to share on social media platforms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View social media not as a marketing tool but an extension of the ministry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 30-45 seconds > 1 minute
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Extend invitation to join next session
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creativity is essential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Special interest groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More than just bible study/midweek services ▪ Photography, hobbies, crafting, cooking, walking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can be social in nature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sermon Synopsis – review and discussion Sunday sermon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Centered in Spiritual connection – Open with prayer, connect scripture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Take clips of Sunday worship to highlight connection to unchurched
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Extend invitation to view full video on social media platforms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Images and video clips to extend ministry to others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capture engagement by members and community

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Testimonials posted of participants and volunteers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document purpose and mission in action;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show love of God in action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reimagine Our Spirituality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stop thinking like a church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-profit helping people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creating content as in a movie or TV production
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Less about getting people into the physical building
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More about being the hands and feet of Christ; not the backs and butts to sit in the seats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reach the people not in the church but those who are unchurched
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual vs. Religious element
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not put emphasis on conversion but making
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • them disciples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual and Victorious
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Online Pastor/Online Host
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recreate Call and Response online
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledge people online.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hybrid Model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue to speak online language.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue to offer virtual small groups with small gatherings as allowed per CDC guidelines.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cannot erase all the infrastructure we have developed during these current times.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learn how to integrate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow model of local school systems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Offer model that give equal resources and attention.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Offer virtual events that are strategically and thoughtfully planned.

Appendix B

Innovation Project: iExperience Overview

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Worship</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We maximize personal engagement of the online ministry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Minister of Engagement monitors the online chat with interaction via live chat with virtual attendees (avg online engagement = avg. online 45 per Sunday / 120 views per week per Facebook and YouTube analytics)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Breakrooms simulate the in-person engagement by providing : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Virtual Lobby – pre-worship gathering for welcoming visitors and members; post-worship gathering for Pastor to greet virtual visitors and members after worship experience ▪ Sacred Space – For individual and corporate prayer during worship experience when in-person prayer is in progress; post-Sermon for opportunity to accept the offer of Discipleship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Community</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide services that bring justice and equity to the beloved community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bi-weekly COVID testing site > avg monthly tested = 42 per event (June 2021 – January 2022) ▪ COVID Vaccination site > total of 125 vaccinated (August 2021 – January 2022) ▪ Weekly Food Distribution Site > avg 82 families served per week ▪ Virtual Learning Academy (in-person for student during virtual learning, who did not have access to internet or family caregivers available) > 22 students served (August 2020 – May 2021) > Summer Camp >25 students (June 2021 – July 2021) ▪ Virtual Health Seminars hosted for Men (Prostrate Care, Colorectal Cancer Prevention, and other morbidities); for Women (Breast Cancer screening, Ovarian Cancer, Colorectal screening, heart disease, etc.) ▪ Financial Literacy Workshops > Hybrid Format > March 2022 and April 2022 > (avg attendance in-person 15; virtual 22)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Prayer</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide Opportunities to bring spiritual encouragement to others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly Prayer Rooms open during Worship Experience ▪ Monthly Intercessory Prayer (1st Thursday of the month)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Word on Wednesday</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discipleship and Spiritual Growth to for personal growth and development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly Bible Study for Adults via Zoom ▪ Friday Night Live for Youth via Zoom ▪ Tuesday Talk for Young Adults via Zoom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Gen Now (nursery, children, youth, college students)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Presenting God in a relevant and relational manner to address current challenges faced in society today <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hybrid sessions that include online engagement during in-person worship ▪ Sessions are recorded and uploaded to YouTube with link shared with parents and youth.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>iExperience Connection</i> (small group lessons on financial literacy, wellness, social justice, forgiveness, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Presenting Christ like compassion to all, “<i>I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.</i>” People need saving not just from sin but also from injustice, from oppression and other social ills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community financial empowerment workshop (hybrid delivery) ▪ Social Justice Virtual Camp for Youth – Perspectives on Social Justice to addressed issues such as Black Lives Matter, George Floyd, and gun violence. ▪ Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Methodologies