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Mentoring Community Kids:
Introducing the Black Lives Matter Generation to the Black Church

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Abstract

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What would the Black Church look like within ten years without the Black Lives Matter Generation, formally known as Generation Z. The Black Lives Matter Generation is the generation of youth and young adults who have disconnected themselves from the Christian institution, faith traditions, and worship experiences that constitute the Black Church. My research focuses on the lack of this generation's engagement within the Black Church. Particularly, within the Winston-Salem community, many of our youth aren't actively engaged and integrated into the life of the Black Church. With the onset of COVID-19, those numbers have unfortunately grown tremendously. To combat a drastic loss of a generation and the Black community, we have implemented a youth mentorship program and added a six-week intensive spiritual formation component. The aim is to develop a ministry that draws young people back to the Black Church: through relationship building, mentorship, and spiritual uplift. The goal is to encourage a healthier mental, social, emotional, educational, and spiritual young person.

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Introduction

"The history of the Black Church is complex and multilayered, and developed in response to a blending of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious factors that are intensified by the fight over the fate of the union."¹ In the struggle for equality and liberty, the Black Church was established on the doctrine of unity and opportunity for the Black community.² From slavery to segregation, the church has been recognized as an institution of impact for many within the Black community. Since its inception, the Black Church has afforded members of the Black community the ability to experience personal transformation, generate social networks, formulate political philosophies, provide platforms to speak truth to power, and support the education of its youth and parishioners.³ The Black Church became an institute of liberation and a safe haven from a cruel society. Some might argue that along the years this church, once known for liberation, has abandoned its responsibility to the Black community, particularly to its youth. "Some of these churches have ceased being neighborhood congregations and have become invisible within the communities where they are located."⁴ Once an epicenter, many churches have drifted from a communal focused ministry into an internal cycle of historic dysfunction. Part of this dysfunction can be defined by the Black Church's nostalgic fascination with past achievements and an inability to craft a more hopeful future for younger people today.

The future of the Black Church has been relegated to the customs and traditions of past generations, without the foresight to modernize its communal experience. Thus, there is a

¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Illustrated ed. Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

² When I utilize the phrase "The Black Church", it refers to the Christian institution, faith tradition, and worship experience that was birthed from black suffering, pain, and oppression.

³ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 312.

⁴ F. Douglas Powe Jr., *New Wine, New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Abingdon Press, 2012), 17.

generation of youth who are unchurched, and have no connection or interaction with one of the most historically influential institutions in its community. “For the first time in Black history, we are seeing an unchurched generation of young Black people growing up in urban areas... Today, there are teenagers out there [in the streets] who have no knowledge of and no respect for the Black Church and its tradition.”⁵ This is the result of the Black Church disenfranchising and abandoning its community’s support. Over the decades the Church has become an elite society where only those with membership gain access, and now stand guard against the entry of guest and visitors. For years the Black Church has become so “sin and rule conscious” that it has shunned an entire community of people that share similar theologies, philosophies, and culture. As a result, the ostracized community has lost confidence in the institution that was divinely created to support, uplift, and affirm its neighbors. “Despite what some critics have said, today’s young people are no less spiritual than their predecessors but live in a time when the loss of faith in social institutions — no less religious ones — is disturbing, understandable, and epidemic.”⁶ Today’s church must accept the responsibility of reconciling the differences.

Therefore, in good faith, it is the intent of this project to engage Grace Presbyterian Church in establishing a welcoming environment for the unchurched generation of youth in East Winston-Salem; by implementing a mentoring organization that leads to church engagement. Through established partnerships with Winston-Salem State University and Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools, Grace Presbyterian Church (hereafter, “Grace”) will be able to cement itself as a change agent for its community. Equally important, the church will be able to offer social, emotional, and spiritual guidance to a generation that has seemingly lost its spiritual

⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 310.

⁶ Emmett G. Price, *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage)* (The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 9.

formation. “Attending to the spirituality and spiritual formation of African American youth requires listening to the voices of young people, and attending to the religious and educational contexts of their young lives.”⁷ The pedagogical framework for this program starts with an internal examination of the Black Church’s past failures. After doing so, Grace will have the opportunity to build relationships and fulfill the needs of the Black community ultimately through mentorship and educational support.

Mentorship is not a contemporary concept, but one that has been used throughout the lineage of the church. For example, Elijah and Elisha; Mary McLeod Bethune and Howard Thurman; Rev. Jeremiah Wright and President Barack Obama. Mentorship provides unexperienced apprentices opportunities to glean from more experienced and knowledgeable persons. Typically, within churches a person from an older generation mentors a younger individual. "Our youth want – in fact require - healthy mentoring relationships with adults who model consistency in living the faith they espouse."⁸ To effectively mentor across the ages, it is necessary to understand the modern generations that currently influence the church.

According to Pew Research Center, generations are defined in this manner: Silent Generation (1928-45), Boomer Generation (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-80), Millennial Generation (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012)⁹. In his book, *New Wine, New Wineskins*, F. Douglas Powe Jr. redefines these generations in order to align them with the generational shifts within the African American community, with minimal adjustments to the dates. He categorizes the Silent Generation as “The Civil Rights Generation”, Boomer

⁷ Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (1st ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2017), 47-48.

⁸ Anne S. E. Wimberly, *Keep It Real: Working with Today’s Black Youth* (Annotated ed.) (Abingdon Press, 2005), 47.

⁹ Dimock, M. *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>, January 17, 2019.

Generation as “The Black Consciousness Generation”, Generation X as “The Integrationist Generation”, and the Millennial Generation as “The Hip Hop Generation”. Within the context of this project, Generation Z will be redefined as “The Black Lives Matter Generation”. The generational labels provided by Powe and me are intentionally assigned to feature important movements that incorporate the Black Church and the Black community.

According to Powe, the Civil Rights Generation represents the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Black Church, more formally known as those who sought to fight for the current liberties of the Black community and its constituents. The Black Consciousness Generation currently holds majority of the church’s leadership positions, which derives from their quest towards black power. The Civil Rights and Black Consciousness generations are forever indebted to the Black Church for its ability to serve as the primary third place in the Black community.¹⁰ The Integrationist Generation is the first generation to experience a major shift socially and culturally, wherein the Black community began to fragment across class lines. The Hip Hop Generation is a multifaceted group that pursues capitalistic gains. It is noted that this generation has had the most effect on American culture, in attire, communication, and interaction.¹¹ The struggle towards the harmonization of these generational achievements has fractured relationships within the Black Church and the Black community. Thus, this has resulted in the birthing of “a bastard generation”, youth who are unchurched and unconnected, now known as the Black Lives Matter Generation. “These congregations [The Black Church] face the challenge in the forthcoming years of having to look deep into themselves and be honest about the disconnect, socially, educationally, politically, and spiritually, that has been created over the past

¹⁰ Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Unabridged ed.) (B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 62.

¹¹ F. Douglas. Powe Jr., *New Wine, New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Abingdon Press, 2012) 20.

six decades.”¹² This disconnect has produced a church with no knowledge of how to evangelize and support the Black Lives Matter Generation. Therefore, this generation has turned to modern culture, entertainment, and other secular institutions for spiritual and moral guidance.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Generation receives its name from the movement that advocates on the behalf of marginalized individuals and educates others on their respective problematic privileges. “The movement grounds words and experiences and animates actions through public protest to reconstruct ideologies, policies, and practices that devalue differences to significations of ‘otherness’”.¹³ The movement has functioned primarily through protest efforts to shed light on blackness and its value to this nation. The Black Lives Matter movement is not lead by one person or rooted in one organism. It is a movement, opposed to an organization, that is a compilation of people of all races, backgrounds, classes, and religious beliefs proclaiming that the blackness that is treated as “other” shall equally matter in this country. From NBA star LeBron James to Presidential Inauguration poet Amanda Gorman, individuals across the world have used their platform to advance the purpose of the BLM movement. In the heart of protests, NBA players playing in the COVID bubble¹⁴ decided to postpone playoff games for two days and stand in solidarity with communities protesting against injustices. Companies have produced commercials, t-shirts, and billboards that all profess the importance of black lives, whether leadership personally agrees or uses this as a prime marketing tool. The BLM movement is challenging America to change its culture to become more conscious of others in this country that may not follow traditional customs of race relations,

¹² F. Douglas. Powe Jr., *New Wine, New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Abingdon Press, 2012) 23.

¹³ Anne S. E. Wimberly, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, & Nathaniel D. West, *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2020), 100.

¹⁴ Markham Heid, *The NBA Bubble Has Successfully Kept COVID-19 Away, But It Probably Can’t Work for Other Sports* (Popular Mechanics. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a33796756/nba-bubble/>, August 25, 2020).

religious beliefs, and political perspectives. Ultimately, the BLM movement is an accountability entity for America to remain true to the notion of Liberty and Justice for all. Birthed out of this movement is a generation of people who refuse to silence the voices that have gone unheard for centuries.

The Black Lives Matter Generation is the generation of youth and young adults, under the age of 24, that have endured police brutality, voter suppression, racial inequality, gender biases, and mass incarceration, to name a few, and they refuse to accept this maltreatment as normative. The abuse against the Black community has transpired for over 400 years, but now more than ever is becoming widely resisted. In this era of social media domination, real time news, and smart devices, many in the BLM generation have utilized these technological advancements as a platform and microphone to share their stories and allow their voices to be heard. The Black Lives Matter generation is the generation that no longer seeks to live the ‘American Dream’, but welcomes partners and allies to establish new relationships across social boundaries. Andrew Root considers this a negotiation of relationship. "In a modernized world that undercuts tradition by allowing individuals to choose their own destinies, pre-existing social units (like families, communities, tribes, ethnic groups, etc.) no longer have the power to determine social interactions and therefore provide intimacy. Rather, in a modernized world the individual must negotiate all meaningful relationships on his or her own terms."¹⁵ As previously mentioned, some in this generation have relinquished their trust in the Black Church, spiritually, socially, and politically. The church has lost its social advantage in the Black community and is a foreign institution to this young generation. In *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, Teresa Latini argues that churches forgo their connection to community through short-sighted religious

¹⁵ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Illustrated ed.) (IVP Books, 2007), 42.

leaders and uncompromising dogma. She explains, “Religious authorities disagree with one another; we have access to divergent spiritual practices; the abuses of religious leaders become public; we no longer trust religious authorities or religious traditions unequivocally; all beliefs are subject to interpretation because they are fallible interpretations themselves.”¹⁶ After years of abuse of power and authority, as Latini suggests, the church as an entity begins to fade into the background. The reconciliation of the Black Church and the Black community can only occur when both groups value one another’s opinion and voice. A fresh relationship needs to be built, with renewed leadership allows for foundations of trust being restored. Without relationship the Black Church stands despondent to reclamation.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to subject the Black Church and the Black community to reconciliation through relationship building and youth mentoring. Developing mentorship within the community will, in turn, allow the youth to engage in their own spiritual formation and inform them of the importance of the church. The Black Church must give an ear to the voices of the Black Lives Matter Generation in its community and offer compassionate responses, while the community must acknowledge the Black Church as one of its most powerful institutions. The clarion call is that the Black Church and the Black community cry out for repentance for its role in the severed relationship. “Lament must lead to the adults’ and youths’ co-yearning before God for a new reality that differs from the present one.”¹⁷ Wimberly suggest that adults must be present to offer support as youth walk into their intended purpose. The call for reconciliation must begin with a desire to experience God in contemporary methods.

Therefore, the Black Church must address its generational divide and the Black community,

¹⁶ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Wm B. Eerdmans, 2011), 25.

¹⁷ Anne S. E. Wimberly, *Keep It Real: Working with Today’s Black Youth* (Annotated ed.) (Abingdon Press, 2005), 35.

specifically the Black Lives Matter Generation, must acknowledge its need for a faith community. “What becomes quite evident after some pondering is that the Black Church remains the only space that can serve as neutral territory to bridge the generations in a manner to not only recognize the growing detachment but usher in a much-needed season of generational healing. The Black Church, due to its challenge past and forgiven future, remains the only space with the strength and courage to facilitate generation of reconciliation.”¹⁸ Uniquely positioned for absolute healing, the Black Church and the Black community, along with the Black Lives Matter Generation, must be willing to unveil the deeply rooted pain that has laid dormant for years. In doing so, this project will provide opportunities for honest dialogue and critique, of both entities. To better comprehend the process of reconciliation, it will be helpful to examine the context of one specific church - Grace Presbyterian Church - and its community of youth.

Context Description

Grace Presbyterian Church was founded in 1907, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The formation of the Presbyterian denomination in America dates back to 1684 in Maryland. Many congregants and leaders during this time appeared to seek freedom from the governance of the ‘Old World’. “Indeed, in the early history of the Presbyterian Church, every vessel that passed from the Old World to the New might have borne with it some story of persecuted faith, some illustration of religious intolerance, to make the voluntary exile for conscience’ sake pledge himself anew to the cause for which he, as well as his fathers, had suffered.”¹⁹ With this in mind, Presbyters sought the early liberties of the New World, which eventually presented conflicting

¹⁸ Emmett G. Price, *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage)* (The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 29.

¹⁹ Ezra H. Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Vol. 1. Presbyterian Publication Committee.*
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0104359545/SABN?u=emory&sid=SABN&xid=fc4125eb&pg=571>, 1864, 175.

dynamics. Over the centuries, the Presbyterian Church had encountered many disagreements and divisions over political and social issues. More specifically, the church endured internal hardship over topics such as theological beliefs, moral understandings, political alignment, and many more. Like many denominational disputes, parishioners develop a new denomination with rules and regulations that align with their beliefs.

Through doctrinal disputes, Presbyterians remained diligent in working towards a church that continues to endure refinement. Being intentional with its refinement, the church turned to the Protestant Reformation, which transpired in the early 16th century, as a guide, referencing the importance of a biblical prospective. "Sometimes the phrase has been rendered, 'the church reformed and always reforming.' But the better understanding is the passive — 'being reformed.' The proviso 'according to the Word of God' gives the criterion or standard by which the reform of the church should occur."²⁰

One of the major points of reformation for the Presbyterian Church concerned blacks being afforded the opportunity to become licensed ministers, given that many of the Presbyters accepted slavery. Thus, a divide between Northern and Southern states formed on the basis of liberal and conservative political viewpoints. "Moreover, slavery was only understood by those who lived in the slaveholding states, and, finally, would the brethren from Indiana please 'desist from the interference with the general peace and prosperity of the Presbyterian Church in the Southern states, as affected by the subject of slavery'", declared a Southern Presbyterian Pastor in 1828.²¹ As indicated in this statement, southern churches enjoyed being stagnant on issues that

²⁰ McKim, Donald K. *The Church: Presbyterian Perspectives*. Cascade Books. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=1485615a-713e-499d-9559-3a26215cf734%40pdc-v-sessmgr03&vid=0&format=EK>, 2017, Ch. 2.

²¹ Conser Jr., Walter H., & Cain, Robert J. *Presbyterians in North Carolina: Race, Politics, and Religious Identity in Historical Perspective* (1st ed.). Univ Tennessee Press. <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.emory.edu/chapter/466578>, 2012, 77.

had the potential to improve the lives of individuals that were ‘different’ or ‘othered’. This brings to mind the wisdom of Black theologian James Cone who believed that God cannot be on the side of the slaves and the side of the slaveholders; God must be on either side not both. “Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism.”²² The logic of slavery and separation would continue until the mid-20th century, while blacks would begin establishing places of worship for themselves.

The birth of African American Presbyterian churches remained primarily focused on creating opportunities for the Black community. Opportunities for growth within African American Presbyterian Churches were manifested through the development of Freedmen’s College of North Carolina (Johnson C. Smith University) and Tuscaloosa Institute (Stillman College). As a denomination, Presbyterians have been highly recognized for being affiliated with over fifty colleges/universities in the United States.

Grace Presbyterian Church was established in 1907 upon the principles of developing a culture of spiritual formation, family support, and social uplift for the citizens of Winston-Salem. The church was an institution that captivated the elites within the Black community: educators, lawyers, and business owners, for example. Founding member, James S. Hill, was an establishmentarian, a local bank owner, and also a founding trustee of Winston-Salem State University. With this foundation of professional excellence, many generations of business owners and educated youth have been reared in the church. Nearing 114 years of service, Grace has been committed to improving the lives of its parishioners through spiritual uplift, educational advancement and economic empowerment.

²² James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (40th Anniversary ed.) (Orbis Books, 2010), 67.

While discord has been a reoccurring theme within the Presbyterian Church, Grace has been confronted with its own dissension; this time its context is within the Black community. The church spent decades being lauded as a traditional church with prominent community leaders as members. Its high church liturgies, choral hymnals, and corporate doxologies are what separated Grace from more charismatic Black Churches. While many of its members, some politicians, doctors, and professors, were stakeholders in the Black community during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Grace's activity in the community was very minimal, to say the least. Grace has not been known for its evangelizing tactics and hospitality.

Grace Presbyterian Church was started as a family church and has had little expansion over the years. Youth camps, Sunday School, and Boys and Girls Scouts were offered for youth during the mid-twentieth century, but these opportunities were primarily made available for members of the church. Grace flourished as the 'Black Church with the pipe organ' for decades. It wasn't until the Integrationist Generation became adults that the church noticed a membership decline. The effects of traditionalism had run its course, and the Integrationist and Millennial generations were more captivated by the charismatic movement. "Some congregations of the Afro-European church tradition (Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, episcopal, and Presbyterians) have learned that if they do not attract and retain the young people connected to their current congregants — those whose music palates, style of dress, and tastes mirror that of urban rap artists — their churches face inevitable closure."²³ Membership decline became most evident in the early 21st century when most of the children, who were raised in the church, were relocating due to work or sought contemporary spiritual experiences. As the community leaders of the Civil

²³ Emmett G. Price, *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage)* (The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 97.

Rights Generation and beyond aged, passed away, potential new leaders left for other churches in the early 2000s, the congregation was decimating quickly with no remedy to replenish.

Currently, the membership of Grace is approximately 75% over the age of 50, with widely 60% of that population being 65 years old and above. This is extremely problematic for the health and future of the church. Many churches are decaying due to the lack of community engagement, modernization within service, participatory opportunities for youth and young adults, and creating a welcoming environment for all. "Many churches are mired in unnecessary traditions, irrelevant rules and regulations, and a culture of the past."²⁴ To clarify, traditions and structure have their place in the church, but they cannot supersede God's command to love and welcome our neighbor. Far too many youth feel that they have no place in today's church, as members or leaders. Due to this lack of integration and involvement many youth are "unchurched" and lack a desire to participate. According to Rainer and Rainer, "Young adults connect to churches where the people are open, positive, and caring. Conversely, young adults drop out of churches where the people are in different and critical."²⁵ Unintentionally, the church has become judgmental and critical simply by being unwelcoming. Therefore, the church must become more intentional about regaining the community's trust in order to be relevant and essential in the lives of Millennials and Black Lives Matter generations.

In order to become an essential church, within its community, I propose the church must first understand the community's needs and seek to meet them, at all costs. The responsibility of the church throughout the generations has changed based on the climate of its community. At one point the church was a rallying place, a central location for church and community

²⁴ Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Unabridged ed.) (B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 57.

²⁵ Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Unabridged ed.) (B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 37.

gatherings. Today, countless churches are abandoned buildings Monday through Saturday and are only occupied a few hours during Sunday mornings. For several years, Grace has been a victim of this church culture. To become relevant, the church must demonstrate its compassion towards the struggles of its community. “The lament of the black Christian faith community begins with hearing youths’ stories of struggle and suffering, and our feeling deeply their woundedness to the point that, like the father of the prodigal son, we run toward the youth and embrace them.”²⁶ Furthermore, the Black Church has to embrace the truth that it is responsible for some of the hurt within its community. When pain is properly embraced and churches become absent of judgment, true healing manifests from transparent encounters. Although this is not a simple process, once the community and the church accept one another there are endless possibilities for relationship growth.

Upon my arrival in 2016, Reverend Touré Marshall devised a plan to reach the youth within the Black community in Winston-Salem. With very few young adult members, I joined the church staff as the director of Youth and Young Adult Programs. Being raised in a church that embraced mentorship, this was an opportunity to introduce the church to its community. The generational divide, or the lack thereof, allowed for all of my experiences to be incorporated. Partially raised by my grandparents, connecting to an older generation felt normal to me. I served as an intergenerational bridge builder. At the same time my knowledge of contemporary culture made building relationships with young people seamless. I welcomed the task of being a liaison between generations. “Each generation must eventually have a shepherd, with whom they can publicly identify during events, worship, and ministry activities.”²⁷ In this capacity I was able to

²⁶ Anne S. E. Wimberly, *Keep It Real: Working with Today’s Black Youth* (Annotated ed.) (Abingdon Press, 2005), 35.

²⁷ Bob Whitesel & Kent Hunter, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gap in Your Church* (0 ed.) (Abingdon Press, 2001), 90.

be a bridge that could unify a church and its community with time, by offering the community something it did not have: a free summer program that introduced High School and Middle School students to ideologies on leadership, etiquette, self-esteem, health awareness, entrepreneurship, conflict resolution and college preparation. From this program, I would implement this project.

The community of East Winston-Salem has been labeled as one of the largest food deserts on the east coast. According to Nutrition Digest, a food desert is known as “parts of the country vapid of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas.”²⁸ Youth in the community lack resources and access to sustainable healthy food options. In the spirit of community engagement, the church became a partner with a food truck that offered healthy meals to impoverished neighborhoods on the weekends.

Education is the foundation of the Presbyterian Church; therefore, creating relationships with local educational systems became our first priority. Specifically, Grace leveraged the connection of founding member James Hill with Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), by establishing a partnership that provided spiritual support for college students and offered opportunities to serve their local community. In addition to providing resources, Grace established a Sunday mentoring program for college students and community youth. Grace is within three miles of two low performing, ‘Priority Schools’: Carver High School and Mineral Springs Middle School. These institutions of learning embraced Grace’s efforts to connect youth with a mentor. This was an important step in ensuring the church’s involvement with its community.

²⁸ Mari Gallagher, *USDA Defines Food Deserts*, 2011, <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts> (accessed December 2017).

With the intentions of building community relationships, Grace also invited local college students to participate in a Sunday experience that nurtures their physical, spiritual, and social being. The Sunday morning worship provided spiritual guidance as students began growing in and wrestling with their faith. Embracing its role in the community, the church became a welcoming place that gave college students space to belong. Continued adjustments would be necessary for the church to maintain contemporary relevance, including but not limited to a young adult praise team, young adult leaders and preachers, and internship opportunities. "An essential church uses all believers in the church for service, including students. These students are not looking for freedom; they desire responsibility."²⁹ To this end, we provide these students opportunities to serve our community to eradicate food insecurities. In partnership with H.O.P.E., ("Help Our People Eat"), Grace and the college students provide meals and mentorship for youth under the age of 18, in two low-income housing complexes. In between service and the Sunday Community Lunch Project students are invited to a brunch that is intentionally designed to encourage intergenerational interaction, between congregants and college students.

It is vital for the church to create meaningful relationships between college students and parishioners as mutual generative stakeholders with the community. "Perhaps one of the most important functions that black churches performed for young people was to provide a place where they could meet older adults, men and women, who could serve as role models for them."³⁰ To ensure the success of welcoming college students, Rev. Marshall and I challenged the historical church culture and invited members and students to partner in caring for the future

²⁹ Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Unabridged ed.) (B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 29.

³⁰ Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 312.

of the church and the community. The process of challenging the old culture took place in preaching, teaching, intentional program planning, and creating space for intergenerational dialogue. The entire focus of the Sunday experience became an opportunity to welcome the Black Lives Matter Generation as key contributors to the life of the church and community.

The partnership between Grace and WSSU yielded several college students with the opportunity to join the church under watch-care, temporarily connecting to a church during a student's matriculation through college. The success of the Sunday Community Lunch Project introduced further opportunities for the spiritual development of the college student. Weekly Bible studies were designed at the request of students, who were interested in gaining spiritual wisdom for practical situations. Their intense commitment opened opportunities for summer internships with the church's new summer program: J.R.A.M.S. This acronym stands for Jackets and Rams Achieving Maximum Success. The genesis of this summer program provided youth, initially students at Carver High School, with a safe learning environment that offers enrichment activities in civic engagement and social action, intergenerational leadership development, and nutritional and mental health. After the completion of the first summer, expansion seemed inevitable. The Black Lives Matter Generation began to conceive the church as a space of opportunity. During the summer, relationships were building amongst the generations to where youth began to embrace the church as a potential "third place". "The concept of a third place involves a gathering place for people separate from home (the first place) and work/school (the second place)."³¹ The program would continue into the school year where students at Carver High School were connected with our dedicated Winston-Salem State students, in a mentor capacity. Initially, the program focused on the social, emotional, educational, and physical

³¹ Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Unabridged ed.) (B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 61.

wellness of our students, with frequent occurrences of spiritual inspiration. Being an unchurched generation, we were intentional not to overwhelm our youth with church colloquialisms and regulations.

The next two years of the program saw exponential growth, reaching well over 300 community youth through the Sunday Community Lunch Project, weekly mentoring at Carver High School and Mineral Springs Middle School, and expanding the summer program to any youth within a 5-mile radius of the church, up to a maximum 65 youth. The program would partner with the church to host several events for the youth and their families, events that have not been done in decades. For example, providing family meals on large holidays, spring break college tours, and church lock-ins that included a lifechanging midnight worship experience. In these moments youth began building trust in the church and its parishioners. Congregants would often participate in activities as a sign of support and encouragement. This Black Lives Matter Generation found a church and group of people, mentors, that cared and were concerned specifically about them. Through mentorship, the youth were able to gain an awareness of purpose and an appreciation for the Black Church culture. The Black Church offered the Black Lives Matter Generation substantive resources that went beyond church rhetoric and judgmental regulations. "There is an urgency to equip youths at risk with the moral values that will liberate them from behavior patterns that are destroying their lives and perpetuating self-imposed despair."³² Becoming a voice of wisdom and reasoning for the youth took time to develop. Not only were students careful in discerning the motives of the church, but parents and guardians were hesitant as well. As relationships and trust grew, the need for spiritual formation was pressing. The first goal was to provide the youth in our community with a practical Jesus, one

³² David D. Mitchell, *Black Theology and Youths at Risk* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2001), 67.

that extends beyond the walls of the church out into their homes, local restaurants, and sporting events. The next phase was to inspire our youth to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through two months of special Sunday services, panel discussions, Bible Study videos, and increased mentoring.

The stages previously laid out were all intentional to build the youth's desire to draw closer to God while journeying through life's evolving cycle. During our first encounter with these young people, they were in middle school and high school, unaware of the maturity required to live a purpose-filled life. Furthermore, many of them had not been exposed to positive role models that also exemplified Christ-like behavior. With comprehension of the aforementioned maturations, our students were now prepared mentally, emotionally, and socially to engage in a comprehensive study of Jesus, justice, the Bible, and its meaning for their lives. "As a transforming channel, hope-centered youth ministry is to contribute to black youths' meaning making; formation of character-building values, attitudes, skills, and positive identity; and development of resilient behaviors based on their understanding of the Christian faith."³³ The J.R.A.M.S. program brought hope and clarity for youth who were unsure of the possibilities that the future would offer. The primary foundation of the program was rooted in moral values and ethical principles through relationship building. The next section will include the proceedings of implementation of this project.

Project Implementation

The implementation process was initially outlined and scheduled for June and July of 2020. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic, altered our initial plans. Due to the age of many members, the church has been closed to maintain the safety of its parishioners. The program's

³³ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Sandra L. Barnes, & Karma D. Johnson, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church: Centered in Hope* (Judson Press, 2013), 7.

primary focus during March, April, and May was to encourage our students to do everything in their power to complete the school year successfully. The transition from in-school learning to at-home learning was a struggle for many students, who were without certain WIFI capabilities and sufficient technological devices. Many students required tutoring as well as social and mental counseling due to the drastic change in our society. Their situations weren't ideal; several students lacked personal space in the home that allowed for productive study habits. Therefore, their grades suffered due to the lack of focus and conducive working environments.

To help reduce stress, we rescheduled our program implementation for November and December 2020. During the summer months, students were attempting to recover mentally from the stress that COVID-19 placed on their families. Our families were lacking proper nourishment and care products for basic survival. So, the program and church partnered with Crisis Control Ministry to provide these families with weekly fresh food options. Without implementation, we met weekly to discuss professional development, social justice issues (such as the 2020 election), creative social media content, and future aspirations. This time was intentionally planned to grant students an opportunity to breath and decompress. Engaging in profound discussions on spirituality, biblical principles, and church culture would not have yielded the best results for this unchurched generation. We deemed it important not to thrust such topics on our students but continue to train them in principles that invite spiritual wonderings.

The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were factors in our student's desire for change, both personally and nationally. "It's not fair. They [the police] have been misusing their authority for far too long"³⁴, said 9th grader Joshua Garvey. Being patient with implementation allowed students to develop a more intense yearning for community.

³⁴ Jonathan Gakeri, Personal Interview [Zoom Interview].

We encourage our students that change comes through education and revelation. Having knowledge of one's own ability, and the systems and structures that are positioned to repress that ability, is one component to enact change. Concurrently, having an understanding of God and His revelatory purpose for change agents in the world is the other component to produce change. Our students, having participated in protest throughout the summer, were prepared to experience the impact that education and revelation could generate. "Critical pedagogy often includes processes of unlearning and learning, reflection, and empowering students to seek and create knowledge, not to simply passively receive it."³⁵ In the midst of a pandemic, we are empowering our students to think positively for themselves.

As we journeyed through six weeks of JRAMS Spiritual Formation, Bible Study, Sunday Services, panel discussions, and mentoring, students began to develop a real relationship with God. There were a few limitations within this project, one being the number of students that were able to participate. Although all of our students received an invitation, many students were involved in winter sports and extracurricular activities that limited full participation. Additionally, there were a handful of students who lacked resources to engage in online participation. Lastly, there were three students who weren't interested, or had work scheduling conflicts that prevented them from participating. During the summer we anticipated about 40 students would participate. As we journeyed through six weeks of intense discussion with only 12 dedicated students, 8 of whom have been a part of the program for more than two years. Each week involved a virtual Sunday service, Thankful Tuesday video, and a Friday 'Family Meeting' check-in session. Every meeting also ended with a survey or questionnaire. During two of the

³⁵ Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (1st ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2017), 209.

weeks we gathered with the entire congregation for one large service where students were given the opportunity to be active participants in the service.

In our introductory session, we unpacked the role of the Black Church in the 21st century, particularly its responsibility to the Black community. We asked the students what an ideal church looks like. 83% of the responses mentioned a welcoming or non-judgmental environment. With only 16% of the students identifying as churched, this is not alarming because the stigma of the Black Church in the eyes of the Black Lives Matter Generation is one that is unwelcoming and judgmental. In addition to establishing a foundation of Christian values and principles, it is also our responsibility to change the stigma placed on the Black Church. In a discussion about youth voting and political interest, CEO of Do Something, Inc. Anthony Welch said, “If people are not involved by fourteen, you’ve lost them. Twenty-five is too late.”³⁶ Similarly, within the church, abandoning our youth between the ages of 14 to 17 is congregational suicide. Thus, the spiritual formation of our youth is reaffirmed and considered essential.

Week One: Who is God?

In week one we ventured through an analysis of ‘Who is God?’, ‘What does God do?’, and ‘How do we know God is real?’. For an unchurched generation answers to these questions are vital for Christian belief. Our scripture focus was taken from Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” It was our conclusion that God is not only sovereign, but also omnipresent. The scripture shares that God is with us, and that’s not only where He is but also who He is. He is an all-present God. With intention, we conveyed to the students that God is the God that is present in the crazy circumstances we face. After in-depth conversations on personal experiences, our youth comprehended God’s power, presence, and

³⁶ Robert D. Putnam, Lewis Feldstein, & Don J. Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), 148.

production. Students wondered, if God is all-powerful and omnipresent, “Why does He allow us to endure such hardships?” I responded, “In faith, we believe that God allows us to endure hardship to mature us and develop our trust in Him. We are an imperfect people, serving a perfect God that won’t let us fail, as long as we’re with Him.” In our Thankful Tuesday and Family Meeting sessions we reminded one another, through testimony, that God has the ability to prevent bad situations, but allows them to: (1) show His ‘God-ness’; (2) strengthen our faith; (3) develop our character; and (4) encourage a grateful attitude. With this in mind and not to overwhelm the students, we simply asked them to keep note of moments where they felt God was moving throughout the week.

Week Two: Who am I?

When we know who God is, we can better understand who we are. In week two, we focused on affirmations and “loving the me, God made me to be”. 1 Peter 2:9 gave us strength through a challenging week. This was the perfect timing for our students to discover who they were, in God. Our discussions centered around gaining an understanding that we are God’s children, and we are loved. With the world in chaos, this generation needed to hear someone declare I love you and demonstrate this love through deeds. 50% of our students admitted that they lack self-confidence and struggle with self-love. With this understanding, we did an activity where students were instructed to find five affirming scriptures and explain why they chose them. This assignment empowered our students to understand their value in the land, which provides a sense of belonging to the greater community. “It is the hard but necessary work of doing ministry with African American youth, and other oppressed communities, which first requires re-affirmation that abundant life is a way of life they can walk in right now.”³⁷ Our goal

³⁷ Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (1st ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2017), 203.

was to ensure that our students believed that they were worth Christ dying. Furthermore, we stressed that their life was valuable and mattered. An undisclosed number of students shared their struggle with value and suicide. And we assured them that God has use of them which is why He blessed them with gifts and talents.

Week Three: Who is my family?

As we entered into the week of Thanksgiving, we jokingly asked, “Who did you invite to Thanksgiving?” We used this tag to witness to our youth that we are all invited to the table through God. In Matthew 12:46-49, Jesus tells the reader that those who do the will of God are His family, not discarding His birth family but implying that He has a family in the Father. Our program has become more than mentors and mentees, but family. Our working definition of family is an “intentional community divinely connected for the fulfillment of God’s will and empowerment of His people”. “We want young people to experience what it’s like to live as a part of the family of God. Our hope is that they grow in that family and increasingly contribute their God-given gifts and talents for the building up of the whole family.”³⁸ Again reaffirming their importance to the Black Church and the Black community, we reminded them that God has use of them. We experienced a great example of this family during this week. A student caught COVID-19, and while recovering and healing she never missed a session. Why? Because she found her family and her place of belonging. Besides losing her ability to taste, she was asymptomatic; but also realized she has value in this family. Students were already trusting the process and learning that church is more than Sunday morning service, but it is the life you live.

Week Four: What is my purpose?

³⁸ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Baker Academic, 2018), 146.

After establishing a working understanding of God, affirming each individual, and embracing the loving family that is created through Christ, our program assessed purpose. With these foundational truths in mind, learning their God-given-purpose is imperative for the Black Lives Matter Generation. A generation known to disconnect from immoral systems, the Black Church and other entities must reconcile its differences with this generation for impactful communal progress. “The Black Church is the sleeping giant in the black community. And we have a generation who is separated from their source of power.”³⁹ Like the prodigal son, this generation seeks liberation from external forces and predestined lifestyles, only to realize that their purpose is brought to fruition by going back to the Father. The time has come for this generation to return home to restore relevance to the Black Church and the Black community. This week we heavily examined what each student thought was their purpose. “Purpose” was defined as “a call that gives God glory and impacts the community”. We encouraged the youth to dream big but develop reasons why and specifically who benefits from this purpose. In a week of spiritual and personal enlightenment, through God we realized that dreams that appear to be impossible because of poverty and lack of opportunity are now obtainable.⁴⁰ I was encouraged by the 58% of the youth that have a desire to impact the youth behind them.

Week Five: How not to give up!

In the midst of a pandemic, youth are struggling to find motivation to succeed. In conversation with multiple teachers, in the Winston-Salem Forsyth County School system grades, attendance, and class participation are all suffering dramatically. We focused on encouraging the students to finish the year strong. It was our belief that reconnecting the Black

³⁹ Dr. Robert Williams, *Exploring the Struggle: The Civil Rights Generation & The Black Lives Matter Generation* [Zoom Panel Discussion]

⁴⁰ David D. Mitchell, *Black Theology and Youths at Risk* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2001), 82.

Lives Matter Generation with the Black Church would provide a new surge of hope to a hopeless generation. "When the people of the community are separated from each other the customs that gave them order, power, and solidarity will disappear, and hopelessness and disorder will emerge."⁴¹

Reconnecting the Black Church and the BLM Generation cultivates new opportunities for the Black community. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians, "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not (Galatians 6:9)." Doing what is right, in the eyesight of God, will always produce a harvest. Furthermore, our students were enlightened through Biblical narrative that God is with us in the good and bad, and His plan for us is to always prosper. The reality of our societal climate is that youth are behind and can't afford to give up.

Week Six: How to give back...

When an individual joins the family, he or she is authorized to share the good news of Christ to others by: (1) making lifestyle changes; (2) sharing personal testaments; and (3) becoming a justice seeker for those in the struggle. Becoming a part of the body of Christ and reconnecting to the church does not exempt believers from the struggle. But we are encouraged to know that God is the God of the oppressed. Therefore, to close out our spiritual formation sessions, we examined the struggle from the perspective of The Civil Rights Generation and the Black Lives Matter Generation. We were able to gather church members and the youth together to share experiences of the struggle. We enjoyed an amazing panel discussion where generations were able to hear from one another and share stories of strength.

⁴¹ David D. Mitchell, *Black Theology and Youths at Risk* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2001), 71.

The Black Church for many years has disassociated itself from the Black community in a class-like hierarchical distinctive manner. The congregants constructed a divide of the “haves” and “have nots,” only to find itself in similar situations from the youth in our community. “... the Black Church is an isolated nation of wealth in the Ocean of Denial, refusing to join, address, or even concern itself with the many ills that still plague the Black Community.”⁴² I believe the parishioners of the church were transformed through the testaments of today’s youth; also, our youth expressed gratitude for the listening hears and loads of wisdom that were being shared by all participants. Throughout the six-week spiritual formation sessions, the youth were able to find solace in the Creator who cares and provide family that serve as caretakers. After years of developing this program, implementing this project was one of the most life-giving moments because our students who had no sign of church now enjoy the church they were able to create.

Evaluation

The project aimed to gather 50 – 60 youth in East Winston-Salem and offer them biblical solutions for practical situations by developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Additionally, we sought to reestablish the Black Church as a prominent home in the hearts of the Black Lives Matter Generation. As we examined the community and spoke to school faculty and staff, we gathered that mentoring was the best way to build this broken relationship. Due to the population of the congregation and their relatability to the community, we found it necessary to partner with a local Historically Black College or University as a means to create job opportunities, social responsibilities, and communal impact. The purpose of developing this program far exceeds putting bodies in pews and saving the lineage of a single church. We sought to create a safe space for youth is to offer an abundant life in Christ. "... create the kind of

⁴² Emmett G. Price, *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage)* (The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 15.

welcoming space where young people can explore the message of the gospel and move incrementally into deeper faith. Programs alone can't create that kind of space. We need to do what Jesus did to create an environment where trust and transformation takes place."⁴³ Jesus was the greatest example of a Living Witness. In speaking with His disciples, Jesus expressed to them to let your light shine so that all may see and glorify God (Matthew 5:16). A mentor's responsibility is to live an exemplary life and share wisdom gained from experience, in a manner that God can receive the glory.

Due to COVID-19 we were able to consistently and effectively gather 12 members of the Black Lives Matter Generation and journey with them through the six-week JRAMS program. This was extremely unfortunate because the program was designed to support four dozen children sitting at home during the summer with no structural guidance. The virus took a toll on our youth socially, emotionally, and mentally, and although we tried nearly everything to keep them engaged students were becoming discouraged.

While the number of participants is drastically lower than expected, the effectiveness could not have been better. The small number of youth offered a more intimate opportunity to share stories and create relationships. In a larger group each mentor could have acquired up to five mentees, but with 12 participants the ratio was 1 to 1. Mentors were able to engage more in activities and develop a desire to strengthen their relationship with the young people and Christ. Evaluations showed that 83% of the unchurched population were now more likely to attend church because of this program. A resounding sentiment revealed that the creation of a welcoming, non-judgmental environment where everyone has a place is the reason behind their

⁴³ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Baker Academic, 2018), 138.

change. Youth want to be heard and know someone is intentionally listening; they want to make a difference.

After postponing the implementation of the project some of our mentors graduated from college and transitioned into the work field. These mentors were a part of establishing the program as well as developing parts of the project. Their input was vital in the planning stages. But most importantly, this group of mentors were watch-care members of the church. They spent two years attending the church, building relationships with members, and being liaisons for the youth. Having to obtain a new set of mentors brought minor challenges to the spiritual components of the project because they weren't integrated into the life of the church.

One major hindrance within the project was the lack of a tangible interaction. Prior to the pandemic, we would have been able to travel and incorporate activities that youth in the program typically had not experienced. Many of these youth have never crossed the state line, been to a theme park, or experienced a traditional church trip. Even more than traveling out of town, all of the youth at some point petitioned for a physical change of scenery. Being unable to gather in-person as a group also dampened the full experience of the project. In their current setting, youth are filled with distractions and responsibilities, and many struggle with focusing completely on self. The pressures and frustrations of remote learning almost made Zoom calls a traumatic platform to engage for JRAMS communication. I learned students functioned better while using FaceTime in groups than when gathered on Zoom calls.

The lack of physical in-person connection also limited the youth's ability to experience the true authenticity of the Black Church, one of the most ailing organizations during the pandemic. Going back to the Civil Rights Generation, power was created, and needs were met when the Black community gathered. "In fact, Lawrence Jones reminds us that since their

inception in the 1790s, black churches have been identified as central gathering points and communities of practice in literally every movement directed toward change for Black people.”⁴⁴

Thus, the BLM Generation has made little connection to the physical church as a place of refuge.

This project challenged the church’s perspective of youth ministry in contrast to creating a family. Traditionally, youth ministry is a church group comprised of youth who ordinarily have committed themselves to the church. Often, within youth ministries students gather for Bible Study and church services, but rarely do life together. I’ve learned that this generation desires relationship more than activity; nothing motivates the Black Lives Matter Generation more than relationship. This lack of connection explains why many youth ministries are failing in the 21st century. Many of our youth are looking for parents, relatives, and loved ones who are committed to their growth and development. Creating a family takes time, experience, and trust, and must be intentional with addressing the specific needs of its members.

The needs of youth living in a food desert, while experiencing a pandemic are innumerable. For this reason, the family cannot only include those youth participating, but must also include congregants who are willing to share and sacrifice what they have to support others. Members of the Black Church are challenged to think beyond historical traditions and attempt innovative techniques to garner the attention of this generation. For this reason, the Black Church must reconsider surrendering some of its power and platform to welcome younger generations. Throughout this project, Grace has been very hospitable by allow students to participate and in some cases plan service activities.

One of the most important learnings from this project is that Christians are called to “BE THE CHURCH” at all times. This generation does not need a phony representation of the church

⁴⁴ Anne S. E. Wimberly, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, & Nathaniel D. West, *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2020), 67.

in the face of adversity. Rather, it demands that the Black Church be more than political and economic, but spiritual and transformational. In the current climate, the Black Church must find a way to become operational beyond Sunday mornings and commit to the betterment of the BLM Generation and the black community. The church and its congregants fail to speak truth to power when the truth is an unknown mystery. “As in the past, the faith community is called to teach the nature of speaking truth to power and actually speak it!”⁴⁵ As the focus of the Black Church shifts from having church to being the church, we must lay the foundation for our youth to pick up the baton.

Conclusion

Empowering the Black Lives Matter Generation to develop a relationship with God and the Black Church is the primary solution to issues concerning the social, emotional, and spiritual troubles that plague this generation. This does not discredit the role that mental health professionals play in the Black community; rather, illuminates the purpose of the Black Church and the importance of a biblical foundation. Theoretically, opening the doors of the church provides endless opportunities for the Black community and the BLM Generation. As Grace Presbyterian Church desires to become the “third place” within its community, we must reflect on the infrastructures of the past, embrace the contemporary culture, and welcome the possibilities of the future.

As we have examined the needs of the Black community in East Winston-Salem, we believe that improving the education of the youth is of most importance. Grace was founded on the principles of educating its members and creating a system where African Americans can receive additional knowledge, outside of the school curriculum. The Black Church is the only

⁴⁵ Anne S. E. Wimberly, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, & Nathaniel D. West, *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2020), 62.

modern entity, within the Black community that can educate all generations. “Churches have moved toward functioning as communities of learning and practice through educational pursuits such as health awareness programs, parenting classes, drug-abuse prevention forums, youth rites-of-passage programs, tutoring, AIDS support efforts, senior adult information resource centers, and the formation of Christian academies.”⁴⁶ Returning to this call of ministry encourages the Black community to look to the Black Church for guidance; in turn, leads the community back to God.

Grace has the means and established partnerships to rekindle the hope that the black community in Winston-Salem once held toward the Black Church. By creating the space, welcoming the people, and providing (access to) the resources, Grace has the capacity to build the trust of the community and fulfills its divine purpose. Conversely, the church cannot wait on the black community to come to it but has the responsibility to enter the community and draw the people. Although the Great Commission is Grace’s divine assignment, the church has recently struggled with embracing its community. “Our response must be to figure out how to transform the Black Church, an institution that is seen as dead and irrelevant to our children, into a living and breathing organism that our young people can rely on to address their disastrous moral states, as well as the desperate social conditions that give rise to them.”⁴⁷ Focusing on providing opportunities to learn and practice will join the church and community in creating new cultural norms, and thus, healing our people.

The Black Lives Matter Generation has not connected to the church because of problematic struggles with power. In a time where re-creation is taking place, the input of all

⁴⁶ Anne S. E. Wimberly, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, & Nathaniel D. West, *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2020), 69.

⁴⁷ Emmett G. Price, *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide (African American Cultural Theory and Heritage)* (The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 160.

generations is important to the future of the Black Church. This generation can reimagine what the church is supposed to be and offer, while maintaining the tenets of the faith. “The process of binding the generations is a cultural and religious necessity for both the continuity of the community and the identity of individual persons.”⁴⁸ In doing this the Black Church meet successfully connected with the Black community and reconnected the people to its history.

COVID-19 has caused the Black Church and the Black community to recognize that life was never intended to live alone. Paul reminds the church of Ephesus that everyone that works in harmony is building the community in love (Ephesians 4:16). With this in mind, the Black Church must acknowledge that it cannot properly function without the black community. Similar to the response of the virus, the church is called to wash, wait, and wear. Ask God to wash and cleanse us of the past; wait and listen to the needs of the community; wear the light of Christ that all may be drawn to Him.

One of the potential next steps in the spiritual formation of our youth is offering baptism. I believe teaching the principle and purpose of baptism is key, but also “an outward sign of an inward confession”. It would be even more meaningful, if members of the church, mentors in the program, and other community residence join our students in a community baptism. Another next step is to encourage the other 40 members of the program to participate in the six-week spiritual formation course. The students will move at their own pace and make the decision to move forward when ready. In this way the church, remains a partner in building youth.

This project has given voice to the Black Lives Matter Generation, providing them with a platform for other generations to listen. More than a sole pastor, an elder, or a minister, this generation desires an individual who is compassionate, considerate, and concerned. Ministry is

⁴⁸ Grant Shockley, Janice Hale-Benson, Jacquelyn Grant, Romney Moseley, & Charles Foster, *Working with Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 10.

more about being present than giving presentations. This project has taught me that listening is the greatest ministry this generation needs. They are not lost, confused, or helpless, but they are willing to avail themselves to the person or entity that avails itself to them. I am now slow to speak and quick to listen because at any moment ministry can occur from or for me.

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Appendix 1

Pre-Session Mentee Questionnaire

1. What does church mean to you?

2. What does the "perfect" church look like from your perspective?

3. What would you like to see the "church" do in your life and/or community?

4. Have you ever experienced God? And if so, can you describe your moment/experience?

5. What are some things that you are asking God to reset in your life?