Who Cares for the Urban Poor?
Changing Race, Class and Religious Dynamics in The Role of The African-American Church in Civil Society

by
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Introduction
Since the election of President George W. Bush in 2000, African-American churches that provide faith-based outreach services to urban and impoverished communities have received significant attention\(^1\). In particular, large, service oriented and professional churches, typically mega-churches, are promoted for their capacity to strengthen civil society by empowering and efficiently serving their own communities (Bush, 2001; DiIulio, 1999; Loury and Loury, 1997)\(^2\). However, mega-churches are often suburban, middle class and attracting members from various municipalities and even states (Thumma, 2000). Therefore, while many mega-churches may have the technical and organizational capacity to address the problems of the urban poor, they often serve a diverse constituency from numerous geographic communities (Thumma, 2000). African-American mega-churches face, as a result, increasingly diverse race, class and religious interests in targeting their outreach services.

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\(^2\) Also, see Leland, “Some Black Pastors See New Aid Under Bush,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2001, for the argument that African-American mega-churches are becoming a power bloc outside the political parties.
Therefore, this study asks, "Who cares for the urban poor?" and "Why?" in order to identify the factors that motivate African-American churches to take active roles in urban community development activities and to assess their role and impact in community politics. The emergence of African-American mega-churches is viewed as an important movement in the African American church community, since African-Americans compose only twelve percent of the national population but represent twenty-five percent of the mega-church population. Further, the African-American mega-church is a composite of trends transforming African-American politics, especially the expansion of an African-American middle class that is geographically mobile and that has more professional training than previous generations. Generally, "African-American church" refers to a church that has a majority African-American congregation and "mega-church" refers to congregations of more than two thousand listed members.

African-American mega-churches in Camden County, New Jersey are compared to distinguish how, why and which churches assist impoverished communities in the City of Camden, the second poorest city in the United States. Living Faith Christian Center in Cherry Hill, New Jersey and Bethany Baptist Church in Lindenwold, New Jersey, the two African-American mega-churches in Camden County, provide insight into the practices of both independent/non-denominational and denominational churches, respectively. They are both suburban churches chosen from a metropolitan area where the impoverishment of urban life in Camden, New Jersey contrasts the affluence in surrounding townships like Cherry Hill. This environment, characterized by racial, class and political diversity, reflects the various realities of

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3 These statistics were cited during, "The State of the Black Church in America," Saturday, February 8, 2002 [held in Washington, DC and televised by CSPAN], by the Reverend Dr. Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes.
African-American political life. The churches’ histories, organization and leadership as well as their community development activities and relationships with local political leaders and governments are compared to explain the role of race, class and religion in determining their political priorities and thereby enlighten faith-based policy delivery.

Why do some African-American Churches help the poor while others do not?

The church in the African-American community is experiencing rapid and penetrating changes that alter traditional relationships between church and community. Social capital theory helps to explain these changes, emphasizing the significance of representation and self-determination, in relationships between civil associations and the communities they serve, for producing democratic outcomes. Specifically, as compared to traditional “Negro Church” and “Black Church” typologies, the contemporary “African-American Church” is often larger, wealthier and more educated than its predecessors. Demographic shifts, in the African-American community, account for a great deal of variety in congregational composition, organization and denominational affiliation. African-American churches are, as a result, experiencing dynamic changes in community identity and class. Further, diverse religious doctrines often motivate them, but not always race, as was the case most often in the past. Therefore, various types of “political churches” have emerged to serve African-American communities, of diverse configurations, that can be expected to influence future church and community politics among African-Americans.

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4 African-American Church is used here to refer to the Church that has emerged in the African-American community since the 1970’s. It is a Church type distinct from the Negro Church and the Black Church characterized by C. Eric Lincoln in The Black Church Since Frazier, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).
Identity and Community: Critical Factors Responsible for Political Involvement Among African-American Churches

Political and theological scholars note the importance of racial identity for motivating black churches to political activism. Empirical studies (McDaniel 2001; Calhoun-Brown 1996) and theoretical analyses (Cone [1969] 1997 & 1970; Cone and Wilmore 1993) emphasize the role of Black or African cultural and political heritage as a basis for community identity and a psychological imperative for withstanding the racist onslaught that has beset African-Americans throughout their history in the U.S. (Cleage, 1972). Generally, "black political churches," those actively attempting to influence government in order to address the problems of the African-American community, are powerful and capable in mobilizing the black community to political activism (Harris, 1999; Tate 1991). The effectiveness of "black political churches", scholars conclude, is based upon their shared experiences in African-American traditions: church leaders are trained in African-American denominations, by African-Americans who emphasize the priorities of blacks (Morris 1984; Paris 1991); ecumenically and organizationally, worship and religious activities preserve a distinct black culture (Dawson 1994; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Reese and Brown 1995); and, large, Civil Rights churches, located in African-American communities of major urban centers, play a leading political role, employing their considerable economic and political resources to effectively solve social problems in the surrounding community (Billingsley 1999; McDaniel 2001; Morris 1984).

Democratic theory, especially the civil society and social capital literature, contributes to this analysis explaining the impact organizations and leaders have on relationships in a community. Studies of social capital have since 1979 explained, "... how social structure
constrains, supports or derails individual goal seeking behavior” (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993) and therefore help clarify the relationship between African-American churches and communities. In particular, social capital is the critical element, according to scholars, in a relationship that is empowering and accountable. Empowerment and accountability derive from shared culture and ideology. These establish trust, condition appropriate political behavior and thereby ensure that citizens have leverage to hold their political leaders accountable (Putnam, 1993). Overall, communities hold leaders accountable by pressuring them to adhere to the norms and beliefs that bind them as members of the same community. Shared values constrain inappropriate behavior and produce social capital, the resources upon which individuals and members of society depend to generate respect, influence and legitimacy. A third party (Putnam, 1993), leaders and organizations that do not share the culture, ideology and interests of the communities they serve, therefore, can neither produce nor provide social capital for that community. While they may serve the community, they will bring their own interests and cultural values into their activities. Although these values and activities may be founded in democratic principles, they are not likely to effectively contribute to democracy in the community by empowering community members and being held accountable by them.

Thus, from the perspective of social capital theory, the African-American church is only a representative of the African-American community to the extent that it represents and shares the community’s culture and values. As a church’s community identity changes, like other associations, the church serves to represent the interests and values of the new community. As African-American churches evolve, identifying with diverse geographic, racial and economic communities, their political priorities diversify as well. Therefore, contemporary black political
Churches do not necessarily empower the communities they serve as expected during the early history of African-American churches.

The Evolution of the African-American Church and its Political Heritage

Historically, the church was the core institution in the African-American community. Functioning not only as centers of worship and inspiration, churches consistently provided the critical organizational basis for pursuing hopes and aspirations, assuaging fears and failures, refining social habits and self perceptions and representing the community's politics and goals. The church has, as a result, been required to reflect social change while also remaining unchanged in established principles and norms of behavior. Thus, the church in the African-American community has been both advocate of the changes necessary to justly accommodate African-Americans in the broader society, as well as representative of traditional morality.

Consequently, this church has been beset with a dualist approach to its worldly mission. It has, throughout its history been at times both pacifier and emancipator of the African masses. The church and its leaders have persisted amidst conflicting priorities to advance individual church members or provide social service as well as to function as political activist or conservative. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges of the church is whether to serve the politics of the African-American community through Christianity or Christianity through African-American politics.

The Negro Church: "The Opiate of the Masses"

Thus, studies of the "Negro Church," as described in the 1950's and 1960's, revealed a church founded in African socio-cultural behaviors and the values of American theology, yet adapted to the enslavement, emancipation, migration and urbanization of Blacks. The Negro Church therefore emerged as agent of social control, refuge, vehicle of economic development
and educator for the Black community. These churches, often small in the beginning, grew as the center of Black life for Blacks migrating to northern cities from southern USA. The politics of the Negro Church, considered a conservative “opiate of the masses” by some, was focused on the Negro community but typically non-confrontational and represented by a few well-positioned church leaders.

The Black Church: “Liberator”

After the 1960’s, studies of the church distinguished a new “Black Church,” borne of the civil rights and Black-nationalist movements. The Black Church had a “Black Liberation Theology” used to advance its role as liberator and political representative of the Black nation in both the cities of the north and south. The politics of the Black Church were mass in character and confrontational in method. As a leading participant in the mass movements of the 1960’s, the Black Church generally asserted a politics of race that united the Black community in support of liberal issues such as integration and civil rights. Further, some Black Churches even took a radical political stance, promoting independent Black political parties and opposing capitalism, colonialism and apartheid.

Thus, the Negro Church and the Black Church were clearly institutions produced by the Black experience. These churches were Black. Their members were Black. They identified with the Black community, served the needs of that community and sought to represent the political interests of that community when involved in politics. They were a part of Black culture and were central to shaping the Black experience in the U.S.

Since the 1970’s, the mass, liberal and confrontational politics of the 1960’s are less characteristic of black politics than in the past. The Black Church has withdrawn from the forefront of race politics and been replaced by civil rights and Black Nationalist organizations.
Thus, secular and non-Christian organizations have taken the lead in advocating affirmative action and welfare rights, opposing police brutality, racial profiling and capital punishment, and advancing political unity for racial justice. While Black Church leaders may hold political positions locally and nationally, and while Black churches may be involved in local community organizing, the very public, social roles and involvement in "worldly" affairs have diminished noticeably. Indeed, the essential and enduring dilemma confronting the African-American Church in the new millennium is, according to C. Eric Lincoln, "... whether to struggle at all with the powers and principalities of this world..." particularly regarding race, in the context of Christian faith (Lincoln 1974 p. 124).

The Mega-Church Movement

Today, the mega-church movement provides an opportunity to examine how the African-American Church resolves the dilemma of race and faith amidst the evolving politics, social issues and priorities of the African-American community, since the 1960's. This movement, which began in the 1970's in the United States, is characterized by the rapid creation and growth of churches with more than three thousand members, housed in huge and often newly constructed church buildings (or centers). These mega-churches typically serve largely middle class and suburban populations of sunbelt (west coast and southern) cities. They are designed to provide a new and more personalized worship experience for the returning or "non-church-going" worshiper. Thus, mega-churches provide their members a broad range of ministries to meet their various worship needs. These ministries are organized by large contingents of full-time and volunteer staff-persons, and funded through million dollar budgets (Thumma, 2000).

As the number of independent, African-American mega-churches grows, they represent an increasing and significant departure, in organizational composition, from the traditional Negro
or Black Church. The church typically has four to eight hundred members; it belongs to an established Black denominational organization, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, Church of God In Christ (COGIC) or the National Baptist Convention (NBC); and its organizational influence is normally local, though occasionally national. African-American mega-churches, in contrast, have huge memberships and budgets in the millions; many are independent of the denominational affiliations traditional to African-American Christians; and they are increasingly prominent, both nationally and internationally.

Change in the African-American Church and Community

African-American mega-churches, as Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes (1998) has noted, "... are harbingers of more profound changes affecting all black churches in the United States...(102).”

In many ways, mega-churches are not new: in terms of size, there were large churches, with thousands of members, that predate the Civil War (Raboteau, 1978) and there were various elite congregations among Dubois’ Philadelphia Negro communities of the (1973) and Franklin’s Negro Church (1957). Yet, the mega-church represents “the most visible evidence of a revitalization and reorganization of Black Church life that has been taking place since the late 1960’s (Gilkes, 1998).”

Indeed, the very process that produced the Black Church also initiated its transformation to the African-American Church. Most studies of the African-American mega-church (Gilkes 1998; Harris 1997; Roof 1993) emphasize the vital role of civil rights victories in altering the class structure of the African-American community and church. The new and expanded opportunities wrought by the Civil Rights movement changed the class configurations and consciousness within the church. And the vast number of baby-boomers, recipients of new educational opportunities, went on to develop into a generation of professionals and activists.
Coupled with prosperity in America’s urban industrial sector, civil rights laws produced a new black middle class. “During the 1960’s, this middle class doubled to 28.6 percent of the black population and then grew during the 1970’s and early 1980’s to 37.4 percent (Gilkes, 1998).

The emergence of this new black middle class is largely responsible for the African-American mega-church. First, as blacks became more educated and acquired greater skills, increased educational and career opportunities encouraged greater geographic mobility. As incomes rose, middle class blacks followed the American dream and moved to the suburbs where mega-churches would come to establish themselves.

Second, class reconfiguration influenced church leadership. On one hand, older, less-educated Black Clergy lost their relative status as their congregants gained professional skills. Since the early 1900’s, as increasing numbers of congregants have become teachers, politicians, lawyers, judges and physicians, the status, as well as number of Black Clergy has receded. The accelerated “professionalization” of the Black community after the 1960’s balanced the stature of clergy with professionals and activists from the civil rights movement (Marable, 1983). On the other hand, clergy also took advantage of educational opportunities and the greater career mobility available. As a result, a more highly credentialed laity has emerged. From among the larger educated and talented black middle class has come a larger pool of professional church leaders, especially in the suburban mega churches.

Third, these professional church leaders integrate and utilize their education and skills among middle class congregants to advance a dual message of individual success and service. Educated in business schools and management programs, the clergy of the mega-church has promoted a theology of empowerment and financial prosperity for the individual. At the same time, they have reinvigorated the church in its traditional commitment to serving the black
community by providing soup kitchens, drug and youth programs and community development to build black institutions (McRae, Carey and Anderson-Scott, 1998).

Finally, the new Black middle class has broken with the tradition of the Black denominations. As the Black middle class followed their educational opportunities and careers to various geographic locations, they crossed denominational boundaries to establish themselves in new church homes. They facilitated a cross-fertilization of church experiences. Their experiences and disassociation from the traditional Black denominations have evolved in the mega-churches into a “denunciation of denominationalism” and the “the challenge of black ecumenism” (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).

As a result, the new Black middle class has been pivotal in the emergence of the African-American mega-church and a more diverse African-American church experience, in general. On one hand, increasing class division within the African-American community has weakened racial unity among African-American churches, as common social experiences, denominations and ecumenical practices have diminished. On the other hand, middle class churches are viewed as critical participants in solving the problems of impoverished urban communities. In *Preaching to the Black Middle Class: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope*, Marvin A. McMickle identifies the role and responsibility of the middle class congregation to its poorer brothers and sisters. McMickle sees growing class division as a dangerous threat to the political unity and self-reliance within the African-American community, unless middle class congregations commit to providing community services to their urban and often impoverished brethren. McMickle advocates a revival of the Christian missionary spirit among middle class African-American churches as a vital source of inspiration to spur suburban congregants to assist their urban
counterparts through community service and political activism. Has this revival of the Christian missionary spirit been successful?

Spurring the Christian Missionary Spirit in Camden County, New Jersey

Two Cases: Bethany Baptist Church And Living Faith Christian Center

Close examination of Bethany Baptist Church and Living Faith Christian Center, two mega-churches located in the suburbs of Camden, New Jersey, suggests that scholars, policy analysts, community developers and politicians should not assume and expect that African-American Mega-churches will develop community service programs and function as political advocates for local African-American communities. Both Bethany Baptist Church and Living Faith Christian Center indicate that a critical factor determining a church’s community identity is not so much its location, racial composition or the residence of its congregants, rather “founding relationships” and leadership determine the priority community for each church and orient each toward particular communities. Specifically, while Living Faith Christian Center and Bethany Baptist Church are similar in many regards, their differences, reflected in their mission, objectives and organization, can be traced back to their affiliations when the churches were founded, which determine leadership, ecumenical practices and ultimately, community identity and outreach priorities.

New Generation African-American Churches

Bethany Baptist Church and Living Faith Christian Center are both characteristic of a new generation of African-American Churches. They are suburban and large. They are also distinct from many other churches in the Philadelphia-Camden metropolitan area because of their remarkable capacity for rapid expansion and development as well as the scope of services they offer.
Bethany Baptist Church is located in Lindenwold and Living Faith Christian Center in Cherry Hill, and both are in Camden County, New Jersey, as is the City of Camden. Yet, the City of Camden, Cherry Hill Township and the Borough of Lindenwold are vastly different communities. Whereas the 80,000 residents of the City of Camden are predominantly African-American (fifty-three percent) and very poor (thirty-six percent of the population lives below the poverty level) their numbers and poverty are far greater than African-Americans in the surrounding Camden County and in New Jersey in general (See Table #1). Among the 70,000 residents of Cherry Hill and 17,000 residents of Lindenwold, African-Americans are by far a minority (four percent and twenty-nine percent respectively) and residents here are generally two to three times better off respectively, than those in the city of Camden, in terms of income (See Table #2) and poverty levels (See Table #3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table #1: Overview</th>
<th>City of Camden</th>
<th>Camden County</th>
<th>New Jersey</th>
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<tr>
<td>Population, 2001 estimate</td>
<td>79904</td>
<td>509,350</td>
<td>8,484,431</td>
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<tr>
<td>% African American</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median household money income, 1999</td>
<td>23,421</td>
<td>$48,097</td>
<td>$55,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita money income, 1999</td>
<td>9,815</td>
<td>$22,354</td>
<td>$27,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons below poverty, percent, 1999</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
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<th>Table #2: 1999 Money Income</th>
<th>Median Household</th>
<th>Median Family</th>
<th>Median non family</th>
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<td>24,612</td>
<td>14,001</td>
<td>9,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>69,421</td>
<td>80,766</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>36,080</td>
<td>40,931</td>
<td>27,675</td>
<td>18,659</td>
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Table #3: Poverty and Population by Race

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<th></th>
<th>*Persons below poverty, percent, 1999</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% African American</th>
<th>% White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Camden City</td>
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<td>53.4%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lindenwold Borough</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>17414</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2000 Census of Population & Housing, Summary File 3

Both Bethany and Living Faith are established mega-churches. Bethany Baptist Church has roughly 14,000 members, increased from nine hundred in just twelve years. Approximately ninety-five to ninety-seven percent of the congregation appears to be African American. Members live, not only in the immediate community, but also in nearby Burlington, Atlantic and Cumberland counties, in towns of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, such as Allentown, Phoenixville, West Chester and Dover and Newark, Delaware, as well as in cities in the region, including Philadelphia, Camden, Trenton, and even Baltimore and Newark, New Jersey. In June 2000, the Bethany congregation moved into its newest facility, composed of thirty-three acres of land, twenty acres which house the worship center consisting of a 3,000-seat sanctuary, a formal banquet hall, a full service kitchen, thirteen meeting rooms, thirteen administrative offices, a nurse's station and a bookstore.

Bethany's congregation is dominantly youthful, approximately equal in the proportion of males and females, even in leadership positions. The congregation is composed of roughly fifteen percent youth between the ages thirteen and eighteen years, approximately eighty percent adults between the ages of twenty to sixty years and thus, less than five percent adults older that

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5 These estimates are based on worship services held during the spring and summer (high attendance seasons) of 2002.

6 Reported by Bethany Baptist Church, October 2002.
sixty years. The church offers more than twenty-five ministries, targeting various segments of the population, ranging from youth, men and women to abuse victims, the hungry and substance abusers, that are conducted through classes, street ministries and foreign missions. Their annual operating budget is approximately $5 million, ninety-nine percent of which is funded by tithes, offerings and donations.

Living Faith Christian Center has quickly become a mega-church with 3,000 members and expansive facilities. Living Faith began with ten members worshipping in the Pastor’s basement in July 1985. Approximately eighty-five percent of Living Faith’s members appear to be African-American. Most members live in surrounding suburban communities, Philadelphia and its suburbs. In 1995, Living Faith purchased its current home, a 37,000 square foot building as the membership grew to five hundred. Since the summer of 2002, as the congregation began to expand beyond 2000 members, the Pastor entered into negotiations to purchase the 100,000 square foot South Jersey Expo Center in Deptford, New Jersey and the twenty acres surrounding it. They anticipate keeping the Cherry Hill facility to house the Living Faith Christian Academy and using the Expo Center site to house a state of the art 3000 to 4000 seat sanctuary and administrative space, recreational facilities and more.

The Living Faith congregation is also dominantly youthful, relatively balanced in terms of gender and very active. The congregation appears to be dominantly youthful, with approximately sixty-five percent adults between the ages of thirty and sixty years and those

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7 These statistics estimate average attendance based on worship services held during the spring and summer (high attendance seasons) of 2002.
8 These estimates are based on worship services held during the spring and summer (high attendance seasons) of 2002.
younger than eighteen represent approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the congregation. Females are fifty-eight percent and males forty-two percent of the congregation, and both are equally represented in leadership: Pastors Lamont and Constance Lamont are co-pastors, the four Elders, those most responsible for spiritual leadership (including advising, counseling and sacraments), administrative coordination, and directly accountable to the Pastor (Winsley 2002), are equally men and women and those responsible for directing the more than twenty ministries of the church are fifty percent women and fifty percent men. Women are responsible for a range of work, not only traditional “women’s work,” including hospitality, the bookstore and tape ministry, as well as public relations, singles’ ministry, adult education, publications and Harvest (or new members’) Ministry. The administrative staff consists of twelve full-time and six part-time workers in sixteen departments (Living Faith Christian Center 2001). Their operations are funded by tithes, offerings and donations (including sales).

Both Bethany and Living Faith readily assert independence from many of the traditions of denominationalism and many Black Churches. In both cases, theological interpretation is the critical factor in deciding appropriate leadership, organization and processes. Bethany’s “Vision Statement” asserts the desire to overcome denominational separation and politics. Living Faith is a non-denominational, but characteristically Pentecostal Church that seeks to reach people of... “any faith, any body who wants to learn the Word of God.”

Their successes in expanding membership and ministries are considered evidence of the correctness of their theology and faithfulness to it. Moreover, they both assert that through the experiences of salvation, justification and sanctification, members of their church/faith are

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9 These statistics estimate average attendance based on worship services held during the spring and summer (high attendance seasons) of 2002.
10 Reported by Living Faith Christian Center, December 2002.
empowered to serve the will of God and if they maintain an obedient life, they may secure blessings of peace, abundance and the favor of God.

Each church provides Charismatic and Evangelical worship and outreach, determinedly distinct from the traditional practices of the characteristic "Black Church." Both Bethany and Living Faith conduct worship services that are highly emotional and spirit filled. However, both emphasize a literate understanding and development of faith. Both emphasize teaching ministries and target rites and practices to particular segments of the congregation. Sunday School is provided based on age, special worship services are provided for young children, and Bible Study sessions are organized in local areas, close to members’ various residences and scheduled to accommodate the schedules of working families.

These innovations suggest new political dynamics for the African-American community. In their relationships with the African-American community, Bethany and Living Faith are as different as their denominational and independent roots. Each combines a different formula of innovation and tradition to define and implement their community role.

**BETHANY BAPTIST CHURCH: A NEW CHURCH WITH TRADITIONAL BLACK BAPTIST ORIGINS**

Bethany Baptist Church was, from its inception, a Black Church and a denominational church. Founded October 1, 1967, Bethany was the first Black, Baptist Church in Somerdale, New Jersey. On one hand, Bethany's Constitution and By-Laws firmly establish a Baptist Church, in faith, leadership and organization. On another hand, in the Black Church tradition, Bethany functioned as a community-based center of worship, meeting the physical as well as spiritual needs of the Black community. This Black, Baptist foundation is the basis for
Bethany’s contemporary evangelical mission and determines the church’s organization and ecumenical practices as well as community outreach priorities.

**Bethany’s Black Baptist Foundations**

Bethany’s founding documents establish a church, according to Biblical Scriptures (Matthew, Chapter 18) and organize an evangelical church consistent with Biblical teachings as reflected in the Hiscox Directory for Baptist Churches. This Directory provides widely accepted guidelines for Baptist churches, to which the congregation and leadership of Bethany adhered throughout their history. First, congregants established Bethany as a Church, “... to worship Almighty God according to the faith and discipline of the New Testament, to advance the Kingdom of Jesus through public worship and the preaching of the Gospel.” Second, Bethany’s Constitution prioritizes Baptism (the full the immersion, dipping, or burying a candidate in water), a profession of faith and evidence of a changed heart and way of living, as the basis of membership. Finally, Bethany’s beliefs and evangelical doctrine are founded on the New Testament and more specifically, the eighteenth chapter of Matthew that cites –

1. the unity and the equal Divinity of the Father, Son and Spirit;
2. a full and free salvation available to all in Christ;
3. atonement and redemption by the sacrifice of Christ;
4. justification by faith, not by works;
5. the absolute necessity of regeneration for salvation;
6. the Holy Spirit the author and finisher of saving faith and sanctification;
7. the personal election of believers; the perseverance of the saints by upholding grace;
8. the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting;
9. also the endless duration of rewards and punishments, to be assigned by Christ (Hiscox 1894).

Thus, from 1967 to 1990 Bethany functioned as a traditional Baptist Church serving the local Black community of Somerdale, New Jersey. Bethany was housed in two structures, one from 1967 until 1988 and the next from 1988 until 2000, both located in Somerdale. From 1970, Bethany was lead by three African-American pastors, Reverend Sidney Mills (1967-1969),
Reverend E. Williamson Jr. (1969-1983) and Reverend N. Henry Ingram (1983-1990) and governed according to Baptist tradition, as called for in the Constitution and By-Laws (Constitution 1979, Hiscox 1894).

Prioritizing Evangelism for Spiritual Transformation and Empowerment

In keeping with this tradition, Bethany Baptist Church, in its contemporary manifestation, prioritizes evangelism as a means to expand the Kingdom of God and transform the lives of church members, particularly in the African-American community. Bethany’s mission is specifically targeted to African-Americans, often suffering impoverishment, crime, ill health and addictions, at worse, as well as lack of information, access and inspiration, in general. Sharing the Word of God, therefore, through teaching, preaching, studying and in practical living is Bethany’s first priority to advance worldwide and personal evangelism. On one hand, outreach programs are designed to contribute to empowering the community, reaching out to non-believers especially, to meet practical economic and physical needs through spiritual and practical economic strategies. On the other hand, evangelism empowers believers to realize concrete changes in their lives through faith. Next, Bethany emphasizes a commitment to overcome denominational separations, based on politics, to unite Christian churches. Finally, Bethany Baptist Church prioritizes training Pastors to lead evangelical and ecumenical efforts.

Organization, Leadership and Practices: “… Just Church!”

Historically, the Bethany Baptist Church leaders organized an independent body of believers free from any other human authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, and lead by pastors and deacons, believing them to be the only two scriptural officers of a Christian Church (Constitution 1979). Men were the traditional leaders, as Pastors, deacons and trustees of the church, and active participation in the National Baptist Convention was typical. Today,
however, in its organization, leadership and ecumenical practice, Bethany Baptist Church has broken away from many traditions of Black Baptists. As Bethany’s Pastor, Bishop David Evans, has been known to exclaim from his pulpit, “We’re just church. Don’t let what’s in the name fool you – we’re Baptist, but we’re also Pentecostal and Apostolic (Evans, 2002b).”

While Bethany is Baptist in name, the Black Baptist influence is not dominant. Concerted efforts are taken to eliminate those practices of the traditional Black Baptist culture considered a hindrance to spiritual development, especially for the “unchurched” (Evans 2002a). Internally, emphasis is placed on not only creating a place for emotional release on Sunday, for which many Black Baptist churches are often criticized, but on building a broad and diverse leadership within the congregation that follows the leadership of the Pastor but is not spiritually dependent. Therefore, Bethany’s ministries prioritize studying and teaching the Bible to develop a literate and hermeneutic understanding across the congregation as well as training congregants, practically, to use their spiritual understanding to fulfill their responsibility to evangelize, especially to meet the needs of African-Americans. Technology, including audiocassettes and videotapes, radio and cable television broadcasts as well as the Internet and computers programs, is used liberally to advance these aims. Further, women, who are often excluded from the ministry and spiritual leadership in the Baptist tradition, are assisted and encouraged in these roles at Bethany (Evans 200b). Women are sixty-three percent of Ministers (Bethany Baptist Church, 2003) and women hold the positions, Chairperson of the Trustee Board and Superintendent of Sunday School (Bethany Baptist Church, 2002a).

In its external relationships, Bethany emphasizes unifying churches as one “Body of Christ” rather than traditional Black denominationalism. Bethany maintains a relationship with the National Baptist Convention for instance, however, Bethany’s most active counterparts
include mostly non-denominational affiliations. As a member of twenty churches in the Abundant Harvest Fellowship of Churches, seven Bishops govern Bethany, according to an apostolic structure. This structure is distinct from the Deacon Board-based organizational structure of the Baptist tradition and of Bethany's origins. The Baptist organizational tradition prioritizes preserving the independence of each church, to follow Baptist principles according to the direction of each church's spiritual leaders, in a confederate-type denominational group. Bethany Baptist Church and its affiliates in the Abundant Harvest Fellowship strive to ensure a bond of spiritual authority and direction for leadership, running from God, through Bishops to all of the affiliated churches. The apostolic structure emphasizes centralized leadership by the anointed of God, rather than elected collective leadership, and a tight rather than loose theological practice among affiliate churches. Further, through multi-cultural, international and denominationally varied affiliations, Bethany coordinates conferences and international exchanges that reach a broad and diverse population.

Yet, while Bethany Baptist Church is a part of a more hierarchical structure in its external organization, than a traditional Baptist church, it is more flat than usual in its internal operational structure. Most notable about Bethany's organization is the sheer expanse of organizational units operating the vast ministries and missions of the church. In addition to the traditional leadership structures, Deacon and Trustee Boards as well as an Assistant Pastor and Associate Ministers, Bethany is organized into seventeen units. Only one of these is a staff unit, Administrative Services, which provides secretarial support, and oversees member services as well as all church printing, publications and literature production. A Controller also reports directly to the Pastor concerning all things financial. Deacons, Trustees, the Assistant Pastor and Associate Ministers report directly to the Pastor, however, only about spiritual ministries to members (including
visitations and Prayer Meeting), facilities management (including security, parking, maintenance and banquet services), and multi-media productions (including radio, tape and television ministries and sound operations during worship services), respectively. All other ministry leaders, including youth, education, and music ministers, report directly to the Pastor. Further, the Pastor takes direct responsibility for overseeing Evangelism and Outreach (including Food Ministry, Street Ministry and Missionaries) as well as conferences and conventions (Bethany Baptist Church, 2002b).

The result is a very flat, organization of permanent ministries or teams, centered on the Pastor. In operation, decisions are made quickly because they do not have to work their way up a hierarchy and morale seems high as paid staff and volunteers have great access to the Pastor. An active and involved Pastor, who keeps the various segments of the organization focused on Bethany’s objectives, overcomes myopia, within ministries or on boards.

In fact, Bethany’s Pastor, Bishop David G. Evans, not only leads the church but he is at its center, as organizer, cheerleader and inspiration. He is a traditional Black Baptist leader in some respects but he is an innovator, as well, in keeping with the mega-church tradition. In traditional fashion, Bishop Evans was called, licensed and ordained in Black Baptist churches. He also has an academic and professional background in business, previously holding positions as Vice President of a lending firm and as an entrepreneur. He has combined these experiences, in the traditional church and as a business professional, to lead teaching ministries “known for his down-to-earth, life-applicable, realistic approach to preaching and teaching,” to increase membership at Bethany from seventy-five to 14,000 during the thirteen years he has served as Pastor (Bethany Baptist Church, 2003) and to prioritize community development in African-American urban communities.
Service and Outreach to the African-American Community

Bethany Baptist Church cares for the urban poor through the church’s community involvement, the community development efforts of Bethany’s non-profit wing and political involvement. Bethany Baptist Church provides more than twenty services continuously from its site for the surrounding Lindenwold community, ranging from support and counseling groups for victims of sexual abuse, the incarcerated and overweight individuals, tutoring and mentoring programs for youth of all ages, health fairs, food, clothing and furniture drives as well as investment programs for adults and families, and several Biblical training and educational opportunities all year. Through Generations, Incorporated, the non-profit community development corporation established by Bishop Evans, Bethany collaborates in a range of community development projects including a Home Ownership Program to prepare first time home buyers for home ownership; two 24-hour shelters, one in the City of Camden and the other in Lindenwold, provide women and their children victimized by domestic violence with transitional housing; Youth Build provides academic, vocational, life skills and employment readiness training for youth of the City of Camden; through their Youth Services Foster Care Program, emergency and permanent foster care is provided for children in southern New Jersey; employment services and a computer school operate continuously from Bethany’s Lindenwold site; and, development of senior and single family affordable housing units are in the planning for the Bethany Baptist Church Lindenwold site. Bishop Evans and the Director of Generations maintain active interaction in the southern New Jersey community to ensure a foundation of community support for their community development efforts. They have generated more than $500,000 in funding from the State of New Jersey, collaborates with various private businesses and public agencies at the county, municipal and state levels, and cultivated relationships with
New Jersey Congressmen, State Senators, the Camden County Board of Freeholders, the Camden County Commission On Women, and local political leaders in the Borough of Lindenwold.

LIVING FAITH CHRISTIAN CENTER: A NEW CHURCH IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORD OF FAITH MOVEMENT

New Beginnings in a New Movement

Living Faith Christian Center is a part of the Word of Faith Movement that began in the latter part of the twentieth century. While the movement has no formal structure, it is lead by several high-profile teachers, most notably Pastors Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, John Avanzini, Robert Tilton, Fred Price, and Benny Hinn who serve as “spiritual fathers” to newer Pastors and their churches. The Word of Faith Movement is most widely known for several theological interpretations that differ with orthodox Christianity, including the following: 1. Revelation knowledge is the basis for all knowledge. It is a more literate and refined knowledge of God’s will for His people, as revealed and confirmed to Word of Faith Teachers, and available to believers; 2. Believers have the (potential) power to employ the force of faith, by affirming the Word of God, for health and prosperity. This is based on the view that spiritual laws prevail, according to which God and the universe operate. The believer, who dies and is reborn spiritually, is a god, like Jesus, empowered to use faith filled words to put spiritual law into operation in the world.

Living Faith Christian Center, therefore, is in many ways decisively distinct from orthodox Christianity as well as the traditions of Black denominations. First, the church has its beginnings, not in a particular African-American geographic community, but in the spiritual

11 The Word of Faith Movement is one version of Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity with roots in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Philosophically, it is rooted in the metaphysics of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866) and E.W. Kenyon, author of The Blood Covenant
"calling" of its Pastor. Pastor, Lamont D. McLean and his wife, Co-Pastor Connie McLean, founded living Faith, after he was called by God to "raise up a church" in 1985. The McLeans left their Sacramento church home to establish Living Faith Christian Center, in the basement of their southern New Jersey house. Returning to the metropolitan area of Co-Pastor Connie’s youth and family, the McLeans initially established the church among family and acquaintances. Second, Living Faith grew out of a multi-cultural rather than an African-Americans worship tradition. Followers of the teachings of a racially diverse group of spiritual leaders, including Pastors Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Kenneth Hagin and Phillip Goudeaux, the McLeans did not set out to build a church in the Black cultural tradition, "It is not about politics, race, ethnicity or society, but a mandate from God" (McLean 2002). Rather, Living Faith characterizes itself as a "local church with a worldwide mission" (Living Faith Christian Center, 2002).

"Seeking the Kingdom of God in Righteousness"

Pastor Lamont explains, the aim of Living Faith Christian Center is to strive after, "first of all [God’s] Kingdom and His righteousness, meaning His way of doing and being right..." (McLean 2002). His vision is consistent with the teachings of the Word of Faith Movement:

It is the goal of the Pastor to establish a fellowship of believers who are called by God to be a part of the same vision that God has given him. The Pastor's vision for Living Faith Christian Center is to be a body of believers that "walk by faith, not by sight" [II Corinthians 5:7] and who are committed to doing the work God has commanded, "go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" [Mark 16:15], "cast out devils" [Mark 16:17] and "lay hands on the sick" [Mark 16:18]. This can only be accomplished through a renewed spirit. It is also the Pastor's vision that through his anointed teaching of God's word that each member become totally dependent upon Jesus. This will allow the believers to be placed in a position to be blessed and to prosper spiritually, mentally, physically, materially and financially. These blessings can then be passed on to help others. "I will bless thee... and thou shall be a blessing' [Genesis 12:2] (Living Faith Christian Center, 2001c).
Living Faith plans to achieve these ends in three Phases focused on three goals. First, Living Faith is implementing its first goal, purchasing the land to build its permanent church home for the Christian Center. Second, Phase II calls for establishing a Charismatic Teaching Center that contains both a School of Ministry and a School of Bible. So far, the church has achieved half of this goal, opening Living Faith Bible College in 1996. Finally, Living Faith envisions a World Outreach Center driven by an internationally broadcast Video and Audio Ministry, an innovative evangelistic outreach lead by preaching, music, drama and Bible study teams that travel and hold special evangelistic services, and supported by community projects and international missionary programs. Many of these activities are in some stage of implementation (Living Faith Christian Center, 2001c).

The Fatherhood Model of Leadership and Organization

"Spiritual Fatherhood" is the model of leadership and organization that best characterizes Living Faith Christian Center's structure and processes. A father-son relationship characterizes the affiliations Living Faith shares with other churches, determines the internal organizational structure of the church and provides the basis for the priorities in worship. This model and organizational principle is operationalized in Living Faith as a result of the influence of the Word of Faith Movement and the leadership style of Pastor Lamont.

Living Faith Christian Center is non-denominational but not without close affiliates. Living Faith's affiliations are based on a concept of "spiritual fatherhood" in which senior Pastors mentor, teach and advise younger Pastors. Younger Pastors follow the leadership and guidance of senior Pastors to develop their own churches consistent with the larger network of churches lead by the senior Pastors. As a result, affiliates share a kind of spiritual covenant, in
which spiritual fathers are responsible for their spiritual sons and their spiritual fathers hold spiritual sons accountable. Living Faith is, thus, affiliated with a local network of six churches, and three are lead by spiritual sons of Pastor Lamont. Further, Living Faith is connected to a larger network of churches, especially on the West Coast, through Pastor Lamont’s spiritual father (Winsley, 2002).

The “Spiritual Fatherhood” model is the basis, also, of the internal organization of Living Faith Christian Center. According to this model, the Pastor is the spiritual father of the church. His role is to spiritually guide and develop his congregation. In keeping with the Word of Faith Movement’s emphasis on “revealed knowledge,” Pastor Lamont’s priorities, therefore, are the study of the Word of God, prayer and ministry planning (Living Faith Christian Center 2001b, Winsley, 2002). The church is organized, as a result, to ensure that the Pastor spends most of his time in Biblical study, prayer and ministering.

Therefore, Elders are critical leaders in the church. The Pastor delegates, to the Elders, all administrative and operational responsibilities. Responsibility for overseeing all ministries is divided among Elders and Ministers and coordinated by Senior Elders who supervise the responsible Elders and Ministers. All congregational responsibilities, including advising, counseling and sacraments, are assigned to specific Elders or Ministers, by geographical area. The responsible Elder or Minister coordinates Bible Study sessions off-site, in cells, in their designated geographical community. The Bible Study is the basis for a “Care Ministry”, in which congregants experience a small church culture. Members of each cell work together to provide care to support each other in times of need. Each responsible Elder/Minister coordinates these efforts and conducts weddings, funerals and represents the church at special events for the congregants in their geographical area (Winsley, 2002). Senior Elders are responsible for
overseeing the implementation of the Care Ministries, conducting worship services and organizing conferences and outreach efforts.

The resulting organizational structure is a hierarchical pyramid that is corporate in character. On one hand, the church is administered through layers. Congregants volunteer to work and lead various ministries of the church. Elders supervise all ministry work and report to Senior Elders. On the other hand, effective communication, timeliness and accuracy are emphasized. This professional culture and corporate organizational structure reflect Pastor Lamont’s preference for an efficient, business-like environment comparable to the twenty million dollar business he has developed during the last eighteen years. The resulting process enables the Pastor to focus on his teaching ministry and the church’s spiritual outreach.

**Spiritual Outreach to Build a Spiritual Community**

The priority of community outreach, for Living Faith Christian Center is to “reach the world with the Word of God...” (Living Faith Christian Center, 2001c). The church’s priority is to share the Word of God through various ministries including nursing home visits to seniors in the surrounding community, “outreach blitzes [of spiritual literature] and community special events” organized two to four times a year and media outreach, sharing tapes of Living Faith worship services with the public. Similarly, Living Faith conducts programs of outreach to adjudicated boys and girls in the City of Camden and Bordentown, New Jersey, sharing the Word of God and offering counseling. Also, a business plan for a Community Center has been developed to meet some of the physical needs of the surrounding community and congregation. The Center is expected to provide a clothing ministry, skill development program (including job placement assistance), a mentoring program and health fairs.
In addition, Living Faith Christian Center has established two institutions to provide Biblical education and training. The Living Faith Christian Academy is a kindergarten through twelfth grade charter school. The Living Faith Bible College offers Biblical leadership training.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY: TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

In many ways, Bethany and LFCC are similar. Both are distinctive African-American churches in their middle class composition, size, professional leadership, empowerment theology and ecumenism as well as their diminishing regard for denominationalism. They are growing rapidly and offer a range of ministries from state of the art facilities. Further, they both rely upon professional administration, creative organizational strategies and state of the art information and communications technologies. They advance theologies that are at the same time more literal interpretations of the Bible combined with ecumenical innovations more open and inclusive than traditions of the predominant Black church.

Yet, the target and intent of their community outreach, which provides insight into their politics, vary. Indeed, the logics of Bethany’s “Black” as compared to LFCC’s “Word of Faith” approach are as much a product of their tradition as their innovation. Bethany Baptist Church views itself as a “Black” regional church. While Bethany’s literature may speak of a multicultural congregation, Bethany retains its commitment to African-American culture in worship services, has served needy segments of the African-American community since its founding as a “community” church and church leaders actively use their political influence to design and win support for programs that benefit African-American communities in the suburbs and urban Camden. For Bethany, Black Baptist traditions and Bishop Evans’ training in African-American churches by leaders who model community service in the African-American community seem to sustain a commitment to “service to the race” in spite of class diversification and religious
innovation. In contrast, Living Faith Christian Center emerged out of a different tradition, a multi-cultural tradition that emphasizes a universal Christian community. As a result, Living Faith Christian Center sees itself as a local church with a worldwide mission, expressly focused on meeting spiritual needs. These priorities are reflected in an organization, worship style and outreach programs that neither target African-American, urban or necessarily needy populations. Instead, the driving force of outreach for Living Faith is the church’s spiritual priorities as a part of the larger Word of Faith Movement. Politics is intentionally diminished in favor of Christian ethics of “right according to God’s word.”

These cases suggest new political challenges for the African-American community. In general, the special role of mega-churches with increased organizational and financial capacity combined with their determination to break with certain traditions of the Black church, create dynamics that are at best new in the church community. Advances in information and communication technology, worship that is more literate, and financial deepening and expansion signal changes in conceptions of community identity, political constituents and allies. These changes affect mega-churches and African-American churches, in general, in their role as political representative of the African-American community.

First, Mega-Churches reflect the diversification of the African-American community. As more African-Americans become professionals and members of the middle class, they become more mobile and settle in communities not traditionally associated with African-Americans, in the suburbs and in international communities. Thus, poor, local and established communities find the distance between them and their more wealthy counterparts expanding. Increasingly, local priorities give way to regional and national priorities.
As African-American churches begin to exceed their traditional local boundaries, policy makers need to be sensitized to the dynamics created by involvement of churches as community developers. On one hand, among African-American Churches, diversity rather than tradition is the best characteristic of church types, politics and capacities available. In the past, studies of the Negro and Black Church distinguished only two types of political churches, either Liberator (activist) or Opiate (inactive) participants in African-American community development and politics. Today, demographic change and religious diversity are reconfiguring communities, and creating new community identities, rarely dependent on geography. New community networks organize around political interests distinct from those of geographical communities. New community alliances are in and of themselves not necessarily a danger to African-American politics, yet they must be navigated and assessed. It can no longer be assumed that African American churches prioritize African-American community needs. Therefore, a new model of black political churches is called for, which distinguishes not only active and inactive churches but also a continuum characterizing identification with an African-American or Universal Christian community (See Diagrams 1 and 2).

On the other hand, we can expect changes in community dynamics as a result of the involvement of diverse faith based community development participants. First, churches may become strangers and financiers. To the extent that they are external participants in community development and service provision through faith based initiatives and charitable choice programs, middle class suburban churches are becoming outsiders with power to influence the needs serviced and development pursued in communities. Even, however, when mega-churches have a physical presence in the communities they serve, there is no guarantee that their interests are consistent with the interests of the community served.
Mega-churches especially are empowered with the skills and techniques of middle class professionals. Scott Thumma (2000) has noted that mega-churches in general are highly technological. For instance, whereas only fifty percent of non-mega-churches are estimated to have web pages, approximately eighty percent of mega-churches have web pages and actively use them for raising funds, soliciting members and proselytizing. These technologies have the potential to divide society along new lines, separating ordinary people from elites with the wealth and education to command technology’s power.

Due consideration, therefore, must be given to protecting the agency of communities served by mega-churches. The churches may have interests beyond the community and identities that frequently have more in common with counterparts outside of the community than inside. Further, their presence and dispensing of federal funds are a potential source of dependence for local communities. The crucial question becomes, “How much are mega-churches truly a part of the community in terms of politically identifying with it and in terms of existing as a component part of and resource within the community?”

Second, the potential exists for diminishing the political role of the church. The church’s role in providing services to needy African-American communities may diminish awareness and critical analysis of politics. Short-term survival needs may compete with long-term issues of social-justice in the list of priorities for African-American communities, rather than coupling them. African-American churches receiving funding through faith based initiatives run the risk of becoming dependent and beholden to the federal government, and therefore reluctant to criticize. Further, churches may undermine collective action by distancing citizens from the state, and especially their elected representatives and usurping the autonomy of civil society.
This would be a great tragedy and failure to live up to what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the church’s responsibility to serve as the conscience of the state.

**African-American Mega-Churches and Their Political Impact: A Research Agenda**

As a result, changes among African-American churches, their politics and democratic relations in African-American community development deserve more study. While many traditional African-American church leaders and church-goers are critical of mega-churches, the political character and impact of these churches has yet to be studied. Studies and political analysis, therefore, of not only mega-churches but all African-American churches, must begin in this era to question traditional assumptions about African-American churches and revise our conceptions of their constituency and allies. Only then are we adequately prepared to effectively assess the affect of African-American mega-churches upon traditional African-American church politics.

Scholars must begin to critically evaluate African-American Mega-churches and their politics, challenging both customary assumptions about traditional churches and contemporary criticisms of mega-churches. We must ask, “Do African-American Mega-churches represent a significant change in the politics of the Negro and Black Church?” “Have they resolved the dilemma of race politics in the Christian context?” “Or are African-American mega-churches merely ‘old wine in new wineskins’?” Studies are needed to assess the political conditions that produce African-American, Independent Mega-churches, characterize their politics, including political ideology, objectives and methods and evaluate the impact of their politics in advancing priority political issues of the African-American community. These studies will assist in politically characterizing the increasingly diverse array of African-American churches and assessing the relevant of race in contemporary church politics.
DIAGRAM 1

Negro and Black Church Politics:
Indicated by the Politics of Activism

Liberator ——— Opiate
Black Church       Negro Church

DIAGRAM 2

African-American Church Politics:
Indicated by the Politics of Activism and Community Identity

Universalist
Multi-cultural Church ——— Fundamentalist Church

Liberator ——— Opiate
Black Church       Negro Church

Particularist (African-American)
REFERENCES


