

NO LONGER REMAINING SILENT: DEFINING, ADDRESSING, AND  
EXPLORING SILENCE EXPERIENCED AMONG BLACK FEMALE CLERGY

by

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this labor of Love to all Black Female Clergy. I pray this seed brings a bountiful harvest for our past, present, and ministries to come! You are SO Worth It! This work is a continuation of my spiritual autobiography documentary I attempted during my CPE residency; I continue to be empowered by the resilience of great women who are a part of my great cloud of witnesses, continue to proclaim from their various platforms, and are now beginning to accept and walk in their great call and divine destiny. To the woman that loved me first and the most, my mother Masie Lassiter: You continue to be the wind beneath my wings, and I am because you are. Thank you for your example of refusing to remain silent first, your encouragement, and for your love and support throughout this process. To Zoë, Zana, and Vada: you each continue to be my why. May your paths be clearer, and your voices ALWAYS be heard. And last but certainly not least, to every Strong Black Woman I know in my tribe, village, circle, AND squad: Sistahs..... WE DID THIS! Thank you for keeping me grounded and holding me down through it all. I can never thank you enough for your: encouragement (because I have been quitting school every day since starting this), nourishment (mentally, spiritually, and emotionally feeding me), and most importantly for your unconditional love. I love you and I share this with you. To all the men that have watched me grow: This one is for my ladies but always know that your influence, protection, love, and respect will never go unnoticed by me! I love you and thank you more than you will ever know

P.

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To my Black Female Clergy Committee, This. Is. An. UNPRECEDENTED. Moment! Thank you for graciously agreeing to be a part of a committee and helping me show the world that this type of work can be done. This is only the beginning. I am so grateful that each one of you supported and helped me blaze this trail! Dr. C., Thank you for not dropping me off when you had to leave. I was crushed when I learned of your departure and understood all the same. Your decision to stay with me and keep me on track has been amazing. I hope I did not disappoint you! I continue to remain in awe of your beauty and your strength both inside and out. Dr. Parker, there has NEVER been a dull moment during our virtual meetings. Thank you so much for allowing me to flood your schedule every Thursday for twenty minutes from my car. I knew when I first met you that I wanted to work with you! I appreciate your Sassiness and am proud of all you accomplished on this road with me! And last but certainly not least Dr. Betty, thank you so much for picking me up during one of my “I quit” moments! You never let me back down from this journey I started on. I told God “Thank you” for finding me a Coach that LOOKS LIKE ME! Thank you for always keeping me on task and on target. I appreciate you most because you were there for me when the walls of my life were starting to crack under pressure; you stood in the gap at times when I wondered if the storm would ever pass. Thank you for your prayers, I felt them then, and I feel them now!

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## ABSTRACT

PAMELA SHANTEL MITCHELL  
NO LONGER REMAINING SILENT: DEFINING, ADDRESSING, AND EXPLORING  
SILENCE EXPERIENCED AMONG BLACK FEMALE CLERGY

Under the direction of Angela N. Parker, Ph.D.

This research project is designed to explore a “silence and silencing” that appears to happen to Black Female Clergy serving in ministerial leadership in Protestant Black Churches. Silence covers a range of topics: sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny to name a few and little, if anything is ever said to address these behaviors toward them. Each participant has been seminary trained, licensed, and/or ordained in their denomination and currently or has served in leadership in a Protestant Black church.

There is not adequate literature available to explain the gap between Black Female Clergy completing seminary and pursuing senior leadership positions in protestant Black churches. This research study questions whether the silence and silent treatment Black Female Clergy receives serving as pastoral leaders is correlated with this gap.

This research study conducted uses a peer group interview method and will take place via Zoom and lasts approximately three (3) hours. Participants received pseudonyms to protect their identity and to increase their potential to openly discuss their individual experiences serving in protestant Black churches. This interview was both audio and video recorded, and the results were transcribed for analysis.

Six participants anonymously attended the virtual session and shared subjective experiences with serving as Black Female Clergy in their respective congregations. Participants

openly shared some situations they had previously remained “silent” about. The participants were allowed the opportunity to reflect on the instances of silence and how it felt to share among other Black Female Clergy with similar experiences. The feedback from this interview has identified opportunities for pastoral care for Black Female Clergy and StrongBlackWomen in Protestant Black Church congregations.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

My response to the call of ministry has been serving in leadership in various capacities. While I currently serve as a Hospice Chaplain, I feel strongly called congregational leadership. My ministerial leadership experience includes serving as a Presbyterian Stated Supply Pastor and Baptist Associate Minister for Black churches in my community. Because I have served in multiple ministry contexts, I have felt challenged to narrow my focus for this project to one specific ministry context. My context for this project is focused directly on my race, gender, and religious identity within my denomination – Black, Female, and Clergy. This is due in part because there are very few Black Female Clergy<sup>1</sup> serving as congregational leaders and senior pastors of local churches in my community. To make this project beneficial for my learning and the greater context of Black Female Clergy I chose to extend my reach to other Black Female Clergy beyond my current geographical location and denomination.

#### **Statement of the Problem: Preface**

I want to preface my statement of the problem for my project by intentionally naming a ‘silence’ that I have become aware of since the six years of being a Black Female Clergy. While Merriam Webster defines silence as a “forbearance from speech or noise: muteness” and the

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<sup>1</sup>“Black Female Clergy” will be used to individually and collectively describe individuals who identify as Black, Female, and Clergy. It is denoted in this way to describe their intersectionality and differentiate them from other ministers who may be Black and female. Black Female Clergy have completed formal seminary training and have previously or continue to serve in ministerial roles within their respective congregations.

“absence of sound or noise.”<sup>2</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes writes about silence in a way that resonates more closely to my experience when she says, “Silencing and self-silencing, is not always about the prevention of speech. Often, it is about censoring what can be voiced.”<sup>3</sup>. And until now, I have remained silent about these differences. My unrecognizable silence shifted from a naïve, fleeting, and passive thought to become at times angry and pensive when I see it consistently imposed on other Black Female Clergy. Other times I found my silence thoughtful when I believed it best to follow suit to help promote the greater cause of ministry within the congregation.

I refuse to believe my silence and experience as Black Female Clergy is mine alone and incorporate personal conversations with other Black Female Clergy throughout seminary and with this interview from my project which yield evidence of how this experience with silence within congregational ministry leaves many strongly considering and even preferring to establish careers in other professional areas such as chaplaincy, counseling, and the non-profit sector. This lack of Black Female Clergy serving in leadership being fully present and contributing their knowledge and skill set to Protestant Black churches delays the decades movement forward they so desperately need. It further perpetuates patriarchal doctrine and left unaddressed it can be responsible for the genocide of great Black Female proclaimers and theological minds.

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<sup>2</sup> “Silence Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/silence>.

<sup>3</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 168.

Many Black Female Clergy shared with me that their silence developed as a learned behavior passed down through generations in the churches they grew up in and attended. It was as if “a significant component of this legacy is women’s tendency to be faithful and submissive to male authority, whether it is in the home, church, or work”.<sup>4</sup> And unfortunately, Black Female Clergy learn this behavior from other Black women (i.e. church mothers and other female authoritative figures in the church) Walker-Barnes refers to as StrongBlackWomen. In her book, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, she defines a StrongBlackWoman as “a religious identity, which has a particular stronghold in the Black church”<sup>5</sup> “Akin to a psychological suit of armor that has evolved out of African-American women’s need to defend themselves against the cultural assault of patriarchal racism.”<sup>6</sup>

Dana Crowley Jack writes in her book *Silencing the Self: Women and Depression* that the origins of women not being allowed to speak as often as male are ubiquitous.<sup>7</sup> She confirms an ancestral and collective feeling that social practices create pressures that lead women toward self-censorship.<sup>8</sup> Crowley shares her belief that women begin to inhibit their voices as a result of learned experiences within their own families of origin and is further displayed when women are

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>5</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, Illustrated edition (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>7</sup> Jack, Dana Crowley. *Silencing The Self: Women and Depression* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991). 139.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 139.

not “allowed the opportunity to speak as often as men in families, social groups, and educational institutions.”<sup>9</sup> The Black Female Clergy interviewed in the study confirm similar social practices Crowley mentioned found within their weekly worship services and how these actions have contributed to their own silence. Paulette Birchett adds insight to other social practices that contribute to self-censorship. She wrote, “biased search committees and committees located in patriarchal regions, districts or conferences”<sup>10</sup> and describes how women inadvertently become refugees when these committees are hesitant to hire and ordain females. Birchett names the effects of these actions - it leads to strained relationships, unsuccessful attempts to be chosen for future pastoral positions, bitterness, frustration, isolation, loneliness, and a poor professional self-image.”<sup>11</sup>

Walker-Barnes’ discussion of StrongBlackWomen can be used to show a natural progression from a lay leader to Black Female Clergy to describe the collective experience of the women in the study as their churches have taught them how their “physical and emotional survival depends, at least in part, upon adopting a stance of cynicism, in which one expects the worst to happen.”<sup>12</sup> The antagonist actions towards Black Female Clergy results in a flat affect and at times inauthenticity with congregations they have grown up in, loved, and served. Personally, I have used it due to the need to protect myself and as a result created a “façade of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Birchett, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,148.

emotional distance and imperturbability”<sup>13</sup>. These behaviors are similar to Walker-Barnes’

“prescriptive identity” that is:

.... not adopted as much as it is imposed. Society necessitates, demands even, that Black women conform to this model of womanhood even when it does not reflect their authentic personality and when it poses threats to their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Black women who dare to shake themselves loose of its grip and vocalize a need for support may be greeted with condemnation of their “weakness” and admonished to “get it together.” And this is especially likely to happen in the church.<sup>14</sup>

These prescriptive identities coupled with instances of silence consistently happening with Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black Churches present the problem and purpose for my project.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My project identifies a problem birthed from my firsthand experiences as a Black Female Clergy. I came into my call to ministry uncertain and unsure of a lot of things and in need of prompting and encouragement from God. My context did not have a lot of female leadership at the time, and I did not have tangible examples of women fully embracing and embodying their call. I have continued my journey to pursuing my call discouraged by it at times and have found myself doing it afraid. I had to be moved inwardly by what Spirit was giving me and not outwardly through affirmation because I was not getting that from my context. I felt called to reflect and dive deeper into my experience of being a Black Female Clergy and made aware of my own responses to it. This reflection revealed the problem of silence and how it taints the environment Black Female Clergy were created to thrive in. At this point it was imperative that

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 148.

my project be used to make others aware of the treatment of Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black churches. This awareness is necessary and is not used to vilify Black churches - I love their history and support the institution. I share this awareness with these beloved congregations with the hopes that it is used to help reclaim and embrace Black Female Clergy; as encouragement to hold space with us as we release our personal subjective experiences of hurt, shame, grief, and anxiety attached to it. Some examples mentioned within the congregations that lead to silence include not being considered for speaking engagements and congregational senior leadership positions that Black Female Clergy are professionally qualified for, lack of support and encouragement to apply for congregational leadership positions, and compensation negotiation. Black Female Clergy are also recipients of sexist comments and inappropriate sexual advances from male clergy leadership and most times do not report them these incidents. These unseen and unspoken results have caused physical, spiritual, and emotional suffering. As I consider my experiences in my congregation, responses, and genetic makeup, my silence has created stressors that make me more susceptible to silent killers such as heart attack, diabetes, stroke, and cancer.

Following my divine prompting to pursue the problem silence through the Black Female Clergy context, I reflected on previous seminary experiences as I considered my project design. I was reminded of my involvement with the inaugural group SistahCircle which was created to establish a community and support specifically for Black women and women of color currently enrolled in seminary. Our goal was to host events that facilitated team building and trust exercises, healing circles, and increased awareness and attendance for Sistah's preaching opportunities throughout the community. Kathy Khang notes in her book *Raise Your Voice: Why*

*We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up* that “Community can be the cheerleader and the springboard from where you find your courage as an individual to speak. You find solidarity and identify with the people in your community.”<sup>15</sup> I realized that the community I built with SistahCircle and the fond memories we shared were opportunities that I lacked in my current role. I was frustrated that there were no other Black Female Clergy geographically located to me and that I have recently been the only Black Female Clergy currently serving in my congregation. (Previous Black Female Clergy have either transitioned to other congregations and/or do not serve in the same capacity). This absence of Black Female Clergy presence in congregations filled with StrongBlackWomen has generated great concern for me and cause me to invite conversation with other Black Female Clergy and explore the correlation between the experiences of silence in their congregations and lack of Black Female Clergy present in protestant Black churches.

### **Project Design and Goals**

How do we make Christian ethical decisions in a world that is said to be without moral foundations – in a world that clearly does not have the best interest of African American women at heart?<sup>16</sup>

Pursing my call to ministry has come with challenges surrounding silence that I have not always felt comfortable with sharing with others who are not Black Female Clergy. This is partially because they tend to be terribly negative in nature and counterintuitive to the goals of

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<sup>15</sup> Kathy Khang, *Raise Your Voice : Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 67.

<sup>16</sup> N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland, TN: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 98.

church and ministry. But as mentioned earlier, these situations have created a level of stress that I no longer wish to embody. There is not much documented about the silence I have mentioned as Black Female Clergy and I am further motivated to research this ministry context with a gap in academic literature available.

In her book *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*, N. Lynne Westfield notes the “practices of African American women have all but been ignored by scholarship.”<sup>17</sup> This leaves me questioning whether my experiences of silence as a Black Female Clergy are unique to the congregations I have served or are they a part of a greater underlying and unspoken code of silence that another Black Female Clergy have learned to adhere to. My goal with this project is to formally share my working definition “silence” as it relates with this ministry context of Black Female Clergy and explore this working definition together with other Black Female Clergy in a designated safe space.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Project**

The greatest limitation for this project is the data presented; it was from one perspective only – Black Female Clergy. This research and its findings are not intended to represent the experiences of silence for all Black Female Clergy or all Protestant Black churches; it served as a snapshot of a sample Black Female Clergy participants that serve in their respective Protestant Black churches within the United States. It was an exercise of trust and vulnerability among Black Female Clergy using a deeper probe for ways they have experienced being silenced or remaining silent about actions that negatively impacted them and/or factored into their decisions

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

to pursue or avoid their call to congregational leadership. Only pertinent information was collected to help the participants remain anonymous because of the sensitive nature of everyone's experiences and specific details of their ministerial contexts.

### **Terms and Assumptions**

I designed this project primarily using peer group interviewing as a research method. I chose this method because it relies on subjective experiences and free sharing of information between subjects with similar interest. It allowed me as the researcher to conduct a process of asking questions critical to analyzing and understanding the culture, beliefs, and lived experiences of Black Female Clergy.

- The term “Protestant Black churches” was used to describe churches of Protestant denominations with congregations of Black people.
- The term “silence” in this project refers to passive and direct actions towards Black Female Clergy that prohibits their opportunity to operate as leaders in their church. This includes also silence as omission of facts or acts imposed upon Black Female Clergy by non-Black Female Clergy while serving as leaders in their church.
- This project assumed that each Black Female Clergy participants would be open and vulnerable to share their experiences among other Black Female Clergy. It assumes that their responses would be truthful and as accurate as possible.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### How Silence Interrupts Vocation

Merriam-Webster defines vocation as “a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action especially a divine call to the religious life.”<sup>18</sup> both my passion and research entwined with my vocation--a call to pastoral leadership. In his book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, Parker Palmer writes, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God<sup>19</sup>

Cleophus LaRue’s book *This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* provided insightful confirmation to some of the sinking feelings I have felt from Black Male Clergy with whom I shared the pulpit. I appreciated LaRue’s acknowledgment of his own prior biases against women preaching in the pulpit. He talks about how he silenced Black Female Clergy through his “unspoken rule.”<sup>20</sup> His rule was more of a belief that he did not believe in or support Black Female Clergy and their ministry the same as he did Black male clergy. His silence could come in the form of suppressing recommendations for opportunities to serve in leadership capacities and would encourage Black Female Clergy to pursue paths more traditionally accepted for women in congregations.

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<sup>18</sup> “Vocation” | Definition of Vocation by Merriam-Webster,” (accessed February 1, 2021), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vocation>.

<sup>19</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (New York, NY.: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 1999),10.

<sup>20</sup> Cleophus James LaRue, *This Is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women In Ministry*, First Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

LaRue wrote he broke his own rule after an encounter with a Black Female Clergy determined to follow her call no matter the costs and he has since used his platform to highlight various Black Female Clergy to share their stories of overcoming the “status quo” pulpits have been so accustomed to. I instantly resonated with some of the stories of women shared throughout the chapters, narratives of Black Female Clergy questioning their call and pursuing other paths that were hoped to be equally acceptable to God. Like these women, I was wrong with that assumption and knew that the real work calling out to me would cause me to continue with this research project which defies the norm.<sup>21</sup>

Alice Walker’s book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden*, was a welcome read as she introduced me to Mrs. Hudson. The “stamina and courage” Walker describes with her narrative encouraged me to break my silence as Black Female Clergy for others and to share the truth of my experiences and internal wonderings.

She was writing about her life, she said, because among other reasons, she did not know how long it was going to last. She wanted, she added to leave record for her community, setting straight all that had happened, so that the children would know about it, and the role she played.<sup>22</sup>

Walker’s excerpt from Hudson’s book, *The Autobiography of Mrs. Winston Hudson, a Black Woman in Mississippi*, vividly describes the trauma Hudson and her family experienced at the hands of “the Klan.” She bravely recorded times when she and others had to remain silent to avoid conflict and her story still lives on. Mrs. Hudson’s narrative compels me to work through

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<sup>21</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, First edition (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 24.

my own issues of silence within my community and to serve as a record for other Black Female Clergy in situations remarkably like my own.

Renita Weems writes of specific silent experiences I connect deeply with as a Black Female Clergy. In *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt*, she describes silence as rejection and further says it served as ways of ignoring, punishing, protecting, and pretending.<sup>23</sup> She also considered it a weapon used by parents and later passed it on to their children.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the silence of ordaining but not endorsing women to senior leadership positions is a legacy that has been passed down throughout Protestant Black Churches and will continue until more is done about it. Breaking this silence hopefully will serve as the liberation and much needed healing for other Black Female Clergy that have been lacking and desperately need.

Through her discussion about the relationship between StrongBlackWomen and the church Walker-Barnes shares, "Rather than helping African-American women to bear the yokes of racism, sexism, and classism, the church has lifted upon their necks a yoke of its own."<sup>25</sup> This yoke she says "consists of silencing, ignoring, degrading, and dismissing women's experience, especially those experiences that reveal the nature and extent of oppression perpetrated against them within the community. ~~It~~ It is important to bring attention to this yoke of silence by naming

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<sup>23</sup> Renita J. Weems, *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey through Silence and Doubt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999),60.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*,60.

<sup>25</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*,142.

the way it shows up in and impacts the Black Female Clergy culture.<sup>26</sup> It is important to break this silence that is rarely mentioned in attempts to shatter the glass ceilings that have been placed over their heads. The simple act of naming this systemic and problematic act “facilitates growth-enhancing relationships for African-American women via acknowledging and validating all of their experience, thereby influencing authentic, positive, and differentiated connections to the self, others, and society-at-large.”<sup>27</sup>

And finally, Emilie Townes writes on how the silent treatment negatively impacts and influenced some Black Female Clergy’s decisions to pursue other careers. It is her voice that resonates with me most as I navigate my relationship with my congregation. I love the worship space that I felt ushering me to my calling, and at the same time I am hurt by those who have resented and mistreated me for responding to it. Townes writes, “Many of us who are African American women scholars in religion came into the Academy as a second choice. We came to the Academy of scholars of religions when we discovered as seminarians that despite our training there was no place for us thinking women of faith in the Church. The Church birthed us then rejected us. We went on for our graduate degrees because it was the next best thing. And now we stand ambivalently before two audiences, belonging to neither but trying to carve out a space in the discourses of both. And why do we not walk away from the Church? Why not reject the Bible? If it were an individual matter, then the choice would be a simple one, perhaps..... But it is not just about our/my individual predilections. It is about our/my commitments. To leave the Church would be to leave other African American women behind. To reject the Bible

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<sup>26</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

altogether would be cut off my conversation with the women who birthed me and sent me off to seminary with their blessings.”<sup>28</sup>

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

For if you remain silent at this time, liberation and rescue will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father’s house will perish [since you did not help when you had the chance]. And who knows whether you have attained royalty for such a time as this [and for this very purpose]? –

Esther 4:14 AMP

There is power, emotion, and memory evoked in language. And Scripture invites us to understand how language has the power to destroy but also to heal and build.<sup>29</sup>

I was hesitantly drawn to Esther’s story and the great risks she took yet encouraged with Khang’s invitation to re-read this text. The more I reflected on these verses I noticed a greater correlation between her charge to break her silence and save her legacy and my calling (and assignment) and work towards the preservation of Black Female Clergy. Mordecai’s sharp words to Esther currently reads a word of conviction for me through continued revelation of platforms, pressure, and purposes I am connected to and being prepared for. While I cannot relate with Mordecai in my story, my attention is focused more on my Divine timeline of preparation for such times as these. I received some treatments via seminary, positive connections with other Black Female Clergy and co-creating supportive space with them (Sistah Circle), getting licensed, ordained, and endorsed, and becoming a Board-Certified Chaplain (an

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<sup>28</sup> Townes, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Khang, 53.

area filled by non-Black Female Clergy) and serving as an Interim Pastor. I also received several ‘silent’ treatments as a Black Female Clergy and each experience come with its share of heart ache and pain; some that I have entertained and others I have yet to address.

Women, especially Black Female Clergy remain silent; some are downright disobedient to the call that they have heard on their lives. They remain silent to avoid the sexual advances and disrespect from their male colleagues in the pulpit. They remain silent to avoid entering the ring and going twelve rounds with antiquated theology and doctrine that keeps them in the back of the church silent and seeking answers from their spouse. This silence speaks loudly, and it chokes the Black Female Clergy’s promise of living out her dreams unlike others serving in ministry. So, I ask “why do we wait so long in silence?”

Because breaking silence is super scary because it exposes your location. Breaking silence can be traumatic. Speaking the truth of an ugly thing that has happened causes one to re-live the traumatic events that they wished never occurred. For Black Female Clergy this looks like questioning God’s call when single and sometimes married men of the cloth took longer looks at your appearance or made inappropriate comments about your attire or dealing with men who just wanted to take you to lunch or help you study New and Old Testament. Breaking silence helps the oppressor and offender find your location. Not only will breaking silence expose one externally, but it also leaves one to deal with guilt, shame, and disappointment. This leaves an even greater question of “is it even worth it”?

I posit this theological reflection as a way of breaking my silence to the negative things that happen to Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black Churches. I offer my interpretation of

this text with a strong womanist alignment. Alice Walker, in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, defines Womanist as:

1. From womanish (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children” You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also; A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.<sup>30</sup>

I shift the focus of Esther to a context that prioritizes my experiences as a Black female and reflects the voices of others who share my history, traditions, experiences of what it means to be a Black female responding to her call to ministry. Understanding my responsibility to this community, I have contributed my interpretation in a way that shows my time of critical reflection, ethical conduct, and acts of political and social justice or injustice found in the

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<sup>30</sup> Westfield, Dear Sisters. 2.

church.<sup>31</sup> My discussion of these sacred text will expose my thoughts of silence and embodiment of what the consequences may look like as an African American female minister and scholar.

In her book, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora*, Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar highlights what she calls “hierarchical relationships” and abuses of power within this text that “emphasizes traumatic and horrific experiences of the female collective which reflect profound and ingrained feelings of devastation, horror, and futility.”<sup>32</sup> She uses her platform to discuss this text to comment on ideologies and stereotypes that justify abuse for the women in collective story of Esther that translate for me similar imagery for Black Female Clergy in Black Protestant Churches.<sup>33</sup> Because the history of these churches has neglected the Black Female Clergy “experiences and perspectives of such exploitation,”<sup>34</sup> I have chosen to include this commentary which suggests reading this text as one would with the “genre of biblical horror.”<sup>35</sup> Dunbar says in doing so we are “made more emotionally attuned to the dreadfulness of social injustices and violations of

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<sup>31</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, UNITED STATES: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).3.

<sup>32</sup> Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora* (Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021),112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*,1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

human rights in ancient and contemporary contexts.”<sup>36</sup> much-needed attention to the injustices Black Female Clergy endure as they attempt to pursue their call to ministry.

### **PROJECT METHODOLOGY**

That [third] move we must make, from silence to sharing, is important, but be mindful to share these vulnerable truths only with people you fully trust..... tell a wise person or else keep silent.<sup>37</sup>

I have previously mentioned designing this project in a way that creates both sacred and brave space to facilitate discussion and personal narratives from other Black Female Clergy serving in congregational leadership. My project followed a qualitative protocol and included virtual meeting space to accommodate my intended convenience sample of approximately five (5) to eight (8) Black Female Clergy. Each participant was provided with pseudonyms prior to the interview and were used for the duration of the interview. The maximum time allotted for the interview is three (3) hours using pre-scripted questions read aloud to the group; I allowed ample time for group responses and collective discussion. This interview was held virtually and was audio and visually recorded via IRB approved software and applications.

I collected the data for this project via video and audio recording and later transcribed and coded it for relevance, patterns, and/or themes that coincide with silence as experienced among the participants. As the principal investigator facilitating the discussion, it was imperative for me to generate questions that did not reflect or reveal my biases so I could collect and report true patterns and themes of silence that may occur with Black Female Clergy serving as leaders in protestant Black churches.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 113.

### **Rationale for the Process**

I selected peer group discussion for my project because it yields more opportunities for specific discussion with such a sensitive topic. It indirectly served as an opportunity to provide pastoral care and support for Black Female Clergy if needed during the interview I preferred this process because it created intentional dialogue with Black Female Clergy willing to discuss their personal instances of silence and the impact on their lived experience and/or decisions about ministry. Lastly, my project will provided tangible data that supported my thesis that a culture of silence exists among Black Female Clergy while serving as congregational leaders in protestant Black churches.

### **Plan for Evaluation**

I created this project with the assumption that there are other Black Female Clergy that have been exposed to, aware of, and are willing to “break their silence” through openly sharing with other Black Female Clergy in this designated space. My project was intended to establish a connection where each Black Female Clergy could freely share their individual experience(s) with silence. I also provided a ministry of presence for each Black Female Clergy participant in need of support as they explore and identify any emotions or impact of the discussions during the interview.

### **Plan for Assessment**

I composed a questionnaire of 10 questions (and several follow up questions) specific to potential topics Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black Churches may or may not have been silent about. These questions were simultaneously read aloud to the group with ample time allotment for responses. The entire interview was audio and visually recorded for transcription

and analysis and participants were contacted individually for clarification of responses and follow up questions.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **BIBLICAL**

My primary argument resonates most closely from Esther's struggle with silence, yet I want to use this platform to also expose other ways the other female characters experienced silence while living their lives faithful to God. I incorporate Esther, Vashti, and the other ladies in waiting's vantage points in this book as a parallel to Black Female Clergy outcomes and a greater exploration of these outcomes as I consider the lack of Black Female Clergy called to serve in Protestant Black church pulpits. I begin with Queen Vashti who was the first mentioned in this story. Her beauty was a remarkable sight and the primary reason her spouse, King Ahasuerus, summoned her away from her own event she was hosting for her company. She refused to abandon her purpose of celebrating and being celebrated among other women to be "shown off" as property in front of her husband the king and his colleagues. Her uncommon response and self-advocacy angered the king and he conspired with his friends to punish her for his embarrassment. The consequences of her refusal to remain silent on this vain request resulted in her personal narrative and history being forever silenced, nothing else about Queen Vashti is recorded from that moment forward. Vashti's unfortunate experience with breaking her silence leaves me to consider discussions about Black Female Clergy experiences who served as prominent figures leading from the second chair as Associate Pastors and Ministers. Once their break their silence their departure tends to be abrupt, mysterious, and their contributions tend not to be celebrated or honored like their male counterparts. My personal experience of seeing Female Associate Ministers leave the pulpit without warning or discussion was unique to the

discussion with the participants in the interview. One participant described being a second-generation Minister and the transition from various denominations to one that recognized her gift and call to ministry. In considering Queen Vashti through my personal experiences, I wondered if the abrupt departures of Black Female Clergy I witnessed subliminally served as the example that kept me silent and continue serving in a layperson capacity for a longer period.

Esther was the queen chosen among other women also being prepared for an opportunity to be with the King. While we learn more details about her story and place in history, I want to acknowledge the others briefly mentioned in this text whose stories were silenced as a result of Esther being selected. Extraordinarily little is revealed about these potential queens, and I want to use this space to honorably mention their existence as their lives mattered. Despite scripture silencing their experiences with beauty treatments there is an invitation as a Black Female Clergy to imagine these women and the qualities they possessed as we consider the pulpit selection process and other congregational leadership opportunities. The awareness of the conditions they were subject to challenges current systems and theological gatekeepers to create unbiased pastoral searches that genuinely matches their congregation's needs with individuals called to that ministry. Further, may this this gap in information from the other women in scripture encourage Black Female Clergy to speak up and generate narratives that reveal their experiences as leaders.

The creation of such tales in many cultures uses similar themes and elements because those features, whereby a minority hero/heroine rises above and achieves some sort of victory over the dominant power, allow the oppressed group to maintain identity, self-respect, and hope. Through her cleverness and patience, Esther thwarts a superpower. The official culture's dominance is thereby contested, and traits (wisdom, piety, cleverness) available to even the

powerless are shown to have empowering value.<sup>1</sup>

Carol Myers argues that this book of Queen Esther is a work of fiction due to its “blatant historical difficulties, internal inconsistencies, pronounced symmetry of themes and events, plenitude of quoted dialogue, and gross exaggeration in the reporting of numbers (of time, money, and people).”<sup>2</sup> She describes how the controversy found within leaves much room for interpretation, depending on the viewpoint other characters (Mordecai, Vashti, and the countless other women in waiting) could have been the hero. I interpret this section using a womanist perspective to discuss how each position these women held throughout this story closely parallels Black Female Clergy’s stories that have yet to be written. This discussion further explains how some Black Female Clergy have been subjected to current day difficulties, inconsistencies, and gross exaggerations from Protestant Black Churches. Like Esther, Vashti, and the other women, Black Female Clergy must continue to answer their call and flow in their purpose to establish our integrity in Black Church and beyond.

Carol Bechtel wrote a section in her commentary about Esther appropriately entitled “The Challenge of Living a Faithful Life in an Unfaithful Culture” that “It is one thing to live a life that is faithful to God when one is surrounded by a culture that supports such efforts. It is quite

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<sup>1</sup> Meyers, Carol. “Esther,” In *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), 326.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

another to remain faithful in a cultural context that is not similarly committed and that, in fact, may be openly hostile to the life of faith”.<sup>3</sup>

The book of Esther (aka Hadassah) shows Esther as being the one chosen after Vashti among many women selected and subjected to months of treatments to replace the former Queen. Her beauty is not the only thing revealed in this tale, Esther combines her beauty with her faith and to reveal her Jewish identity to save her race of people from genocide. The story ends with Esther’s heroic actions which overturned a series of events to an unexpected end for Haman. These acts open to interpretations were both indirectly and divinely chosen for "times such as these.”

Despite Esther’s story being rejected due to the lack of historical presence found in the Qumran or Dead Sea scrolls and its failure to explicitly mention God, it was finally accepted in the 8th century by the Eastern Church. Myers notes that Esther’s victory of saving her Jewish people did not “mean that the dominant power was toppled” she as the hero of this diaspora novella established “the integrity of the minority group with the larger culture.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Esther: In Conversation with Mordecai**

I found Carol Bechtel’s viewpoint and contribution of Mordecai and his important discussion with Esther worth adding to my comparative analysis. I appreciated her feminine perspective with this text. In her book, *Esther: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* when she wrote, “Mordecai has interpreted Esther’s hesitancy as— guess what—

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<sup>3</sup> Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2011) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/merceru/detail.action?docID=5974176>. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 326.

cowardice and/or selfishness.”<sup>5</sup> She notes he began with a “pointed reminder” that she will either die in that moment of remaining silent or she can die later as her prosperous life would allow, but her life’s decision will directly impact not just her legacy but that of others.<sup>6</sup> It seemed as if had placed the weight and guilt of the entire world on Esther while and not taken responsibility for even getting her into this predicament to begin with. In this moment he is shown protecting his own life at the risk of hers. There are some that may believe that Esther should be indebted to Mordecai for the recent radical change in her life because she recently went from a pit to the palace. This warped sense of gratitude is flawed and baseless. We may never have known what would have become of Esther had this not been her fate, but I genuinely believe she would have lived a decent life without the palace or now this even greater threat before her.

Mordecai’s word choice is also very intentional and conniving. He creates unknown competition when he selectively manipulates the priority of death to harshly severe Esther and her lifeline’s existence first when in fact it may have happen much later if not at all had she remained silent. Mordecai’s actions of refusing to bow would have placed him further up the list had the massacres taken place. He abused his knowledge of Esther’s character when he guilted her about relief for the Jews coming from another source. He places the weight of a race of God’s chosen on her shoulders. Mordecai has built her up to hide behind her.

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<sup>5</sup> Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY, UNITED STATES: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2011), 53. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/merceru/detail.action?docID=5974176>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

In a section appropriately titled “The Challenge of Living a Faithful Life in an Unfaithful Culture” Carol Bechtel writes, “It is one thing to live a life that is faithful to God when one is surrounded by a culture that supports such efforts. It is quite another to remain faithful in a cultural context that is not similarly committed and that, in fact, may be openly hostile to the life of faith”.<sup>7</sup> Esther’s very life had a purpose and her faithfulness to God first and then to the Jews allowed their lives to be spared.

Bechtel vividly notes that “God is very much a character in this book.”<sup>8</sup> Esther’s appeal may not have yielded the same ending had she relied solely on her premature knowledge of the king and royal affairs. It was her hidden faith in the unspoken God that allowed her to be the hero in this story; had she looked to do this in her own strength she would be leaving her legacy to perish. I see the great challenge mentioned in Esther’s life being embodied in Black Female Clergy lives more often than I care to mention. And quickly it is those lives that become the sacrificial lamb in times of great need from those who only “put us on” to ministry opportunities stand to gain from us having it. One of the hardest truths to accept is knowing in part your divine purpose and assignment. There is a fine print not visible to human eyes that always guarantees that fulfilling the purpose will look nothing like it appears to be planned. Esther’s fine print associated with her yes to receiving beauty treatments and subsequently being the queen was that she would also have to remain silent about being a part of God’s chosen people during terrible times. She was also unaware that this little truth would also be used against her in a huge way;

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

she became the sacrifice and later a savior for her people. It is more difficult to accept this as a Black Female Clergy and yet I daily learn of God's divine intention for keeping me on a need-to-know basis as it relates to ministry. No one other than Jesus would answer the call understanding full picture and level of sacrifice the fine print includes.

Bechtel advertises for more discussion of Esther in churches and notes "in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, the book of Esther is featured only once. A brief look at these lections reveals a lot about one of the ways Christians seek— or do not seek— to appropriate Esther."<sup>9</sup> Is this decision guided on the fact that God is not mentioned while it remains a book in the Bible? Or is it because a woman is the one who saves the people in the presence of so many men? And with men being at the front of most pulpits on Sunday morning this text will continue to remain up to the eyes of the beholder and proclaimer. Therefore, Bechtel charges against churches relying on "the lectionary to acquaint our congregations with the book of Esther."<sup>10</sup> The book of Esther should be preached to encourage all women to listen to and follow their divine purpose at all costs. Esther's actions should also serve as her dedication and faithfulness to God as well as how the end results reflect how clearly, she was focused and intent to carry out God's plan.<sup>11</sup> Esther's life could also serve as a guide of how to survive in a foreign land as she has had to learn about the customs of the Persian court to later use it to her advantage.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 53.

Sidnie White Crawford echoes much of Bechtel's commentary. She does note Mordecai's response "by prodding her to act, emphasizing the importance of human action in accomplishing God's purpose and reminding her that as queen she does have power."<sup>13</sup> She adds a more historical context to her discussion about Esther and Mordecai; she describes the historical setting of the book as an "androcentric, male-dominated Persian Empire"<sup>14</sup>hero continued to baffle commentators, particularly male Protestant commentators, who wished to make the book conform to the expectations of a Western Christian audience."<sup>15</sup> Crawford closes by saying, "the tendency among scholars was to exalt Mordecai as the true hero of the tale and to downplay or even vilify the role of Esther."<sup>16</sup>

### **Esther: In the African Diaspora**

Dorothy Bea Akoto (née Abutiate) shares a distinct perspective of Esther and does not look specifically at the conversation with Mordecai, but provides a backdrop of the environment Esther and others like her are living in. Despite being in a foreign land, the book of Esther addresses locally the "gender and power issues" present and discusses the "interrelationship of divine intervention by a "hidden God" and human agency."<sup>17</sup> Akoto demonstrates the parallel of

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<sup>13</sup> Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *The Women's Bible Commentary: Revised and Expanded Edition* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: SPCK, 2014), 324. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/merceru/detail.action?docID=1717457>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>17</sup> Crystal Downing and Rodney S. Sadler Jr, *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009). 268.

Esther with African peoples through their “local/communal, regional, and ethnic-specific interpretative differences”<sup>18</sup> and argues Esther, if placed in African royal settings, would still be entrenched in similar instances of patriarchy throughout the court royal disputes there as well.<sup>19</sup>

Akoto points out that despite Esther’s intelligence, she receives attention because of her “beauty, docility, and obedience in concealing her Jewish identity to win the love of a heathen king.”<sup>20</sup> She credits Esther’s beauty, position, and wisdom and notes how those things allowed her to be in charge of the affairs in the kingdom; this led to the deliverance of herself and her people from destruction despite extreme patriarchal/male domination, sexism, gender, classicism, and social status relationships.<sup>21</sup> Lastly, Akoto speaks of colonialism and imperialism in African cultures and how these issues also existed in Esther; issues such as “extreme anger and bitter local, ethnic, regional, tribal, communal and other jealousies being fanned by political or imperialistic tendencies.”<sup>22</sup>

Dunbar’s vivid imagination and attention to detail in her commentary is what I enjoyed and favored most when considering this biblical text as it relates to Black Female Clergy. She states her case through an Africana biblical criticism using black feminist, womanist, and postcolonial critical methodologies; she depicts Esther’s life through Africana life, history, and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 270.

culture at the center of the interpretative process.<sup>23</sup> She implements intersectionality and polyvocality theories to open and expose additional imbedded and oppressive ideologies found in this context.<sup>24</sup> Dunbar distinguishes herself from other commentaries and aligns with some who address life under imperial domination and mentions how others have “downplayed or disregarded diasporized vulnerability.”<sup>25</sup> Dunbar notes problematic gendered relationships between the male and female characters in Esther.

In addition, it becomes clear that the diverse mechanisms of sexual trafficking are situated in broader contexts of colonialism and capitalism, and characterized by kyriarchy, patriarchy, gender hierarchies, political conflicts, abuses of power, domination, and brutal physical and sexual violence, as well as by survival in these hostile contexts.<sup>26</sup>

Inclusion of the African diaspora to this Persian text allowed me to see more women of color; it prompted me to consider the many women that were not mentioned who were taken from their homes to vie for the grand prize of the king’s attention. This sparks sadness and disdain as I consider how great female preachers who appeal to the men are paraded around and their talents displayed. Who considers their feelings or even asks if this is something that they agree to. Dunbar further notes, “such intentional displacement, colonization, and sexual

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<sup>23</sup> Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora* (Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 110.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/merceru/detail.action?docID=6798526>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 110.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 111.

exploitation of Africana girls and women are not, however, restricted to the pages of this biblical text, but have been practiced throughout much of history, leading to collective cultural trauma.”<sup>27</sup>

Dunbar highlights how “the book of Esther is often read as comedy, or as a celebration of a beautiful and clever heroine who ascends to the Persian throne as queen – this does not tell the whole story, because it obscures, suppresses, and tacitly condones large-scale abuse.”<sup>28</sup> Having her critique explained in this way “can encourage readers to engage empathetically with the injuries of both individuals and collectives that have too often historically been ignored and suppressed in both sacred and cultural narratives.”<sup>29</sup>

As I consider Dunbar’s work as a Black Female scholar, I applaud her charge to readers of the text and her audacity to make it live in the lives of Black and Brown Female Clergy. She invites all to consider as many vantage points as we are able so that we may see a picture more clearly and not recklessly make horrible texts romantic. She specifically looks at this text in the African American community where a song was recorded that made Esther’s story feel like something all women should aspire to. She cautions,

We cannot select, or sound-bite, the verse in Esther 4 where Mordecai suggests Esther may have come to royal dignity, “for such a time as this.” We cannot merely celebrate Esther’s willingness or, decision to give in to pressure by Mordecai, to become a martyr for her people, without shedding light on the other women in the text and on the context, conditions, and actions that produced “a time as this.” In other words, in order to preach and teach on “such a time as this” or “one night with the king,” interpreters, teachers, preachers, and readers must be attentive to the ancient context that produced this text and to intersecting

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 114.

race/ethnic, gender, class, and other aspects of identity that are at play in enactments of oppression and in the progression of the plot.”<sup>30</sup> For many readers, exposure to this trauma and horror triggers anger, outrage, grief, and even mistrust of those who have failed to identify and who continuously perpetuate, physically and narratively, injustices against African people. Collective memory enables us to better understand the past and present and, at the same time, galvanizes us to analyze the collective “us” through patterns of abuse and oppression perpetuated against us.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, to Bechtel, Dunbar answers readers' “so what” to the wealth of knowledge she provides. Her invitation to read the text from this perspective makes others aware of the things that historically took place for Esther and continue to be present day throughout the world. I am reminded of an adage “when you know better you do better” and appreciates how Dunbar provides potential ways readers of her text can do better when studying and proclaiming texts like Esther with her urgent plea.

.... because this ancient text is revered and canonized and as such, continues to be made relevant and to be consulted for guidance up to the present. We must acknowledge the role that religions and sacred stories play in creating and maintaining hierarchies of power, as well as their impact on the psyches and identities of readers. Additionally, those who claim a Jewish or Christian identity must wrestle with the toxic content of biblical texts, be attentive to the injustices detailed within and to theologies that have been applied in contemporary contexts to maintain gender, ethnic, social, and cultural inequities. Narratives like the book of Esther, read with attention to the horrific events detailed throughout, can also invite us as readers and interpreters to wrestle with our understanding of the sacrality of human life and with whether the “sacred” texts that we have inherited and that we engage in our faith traditions and religious systems create and foster inclusion and a sense of community among all of humanity.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 115.

Her word towards humanity makes women of all faiths and religions important. This reality removes the rose color glasses from our eyes and makes privileged people privy to real life events going on. Dunbar's interpretation of this text draws me closer still to Esther and my call; I do not just see the legacy of family that I was physically born into by my mother and father, I see the many sisters I have gained when we all accepted our call into ministry. And while my experience has not been as horrific as Esther's or even those of the African diaspora, I do acknowledge a collective trauma that we share and that we have not shared amongst ourselves or with others. Not shedding light on the atrocities, we face while serving in ministry could leave those watching us serve continue to view us with rose colored glasses. They can easily critique, ridicule and shame us for the work we are doing, not clearly seeing the hell that goes on behind the scenes.

Dunbar reveals how the ancient community used this text to create social hierarchies that are that suppress and/or erase the experiences and struggles of other ethnic groups that co-exist with the Jews in the story world.<sup>33</sup> These very same sentiments could be used in pulpits today and finding ways to keep Esther reduced to being trained to be pleasing in sight and service only to her king. Dunbar notes that once we recognize this, we should also recognize the groups who struggle with access to power, sexual abuse, and other cultural oppressions.<sup>34</sup> And again, when we know better, we must do better. We must speak up and out against these practices.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

## HISTORICAL

In the introduction of her book *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*, Chanta Haywood writes, “During the nineteenth century, women in the Black church were relegated to positions that posed no real threat to the power structure maintained by preachers, deacons, and other male leaders.... Those who dared to become preachers or even independent missionaries were often met with strong opposition by men and even women.”<sup>35</sup> Her work serves as establishing the history of women I would include in my description of Black Female Clergy. Townes adds, “There are times when the only recourse open to us is resistance” and these brave pioneers did not succumb to the pressure of taking the path of least resistance.<sup>36</sup> They did not define their roles or theology beyond the tasks of sharing the Word of God had given it to them for the people of their time. Their refusal to remain silent despite the consequences helped them to share their prophetic voice which “exposed the oppressive nature of society.”<sup>37</sup>

Since then, great women of color like Alice Walker have contributed to the evolution of Black women preachers and shared in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, a term many Black Female Clergy most closely resonate with – Womanism. Mitzi Smith in her book *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation*

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<sup>35</sup> Chanta M. Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*, 1st ed. (University of Missouri Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Katie G. Cannon, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Angela D. Sims, *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, 1st ed., Library of theological ethics. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

respectfully honors both Walker and her work and wrote, “According to Alice Walker a “Womanist” is a woman of color who speaks and acts *womanish*. She behaves and talks like a grown and capable woman who assumes responsibility for her own well-being, and she is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”<sup>38</sup> Walker exclaims that womanist “boldly use our (their) agency to interpret sacred texts for ourselves and in ways that free us (them) and our (their) communities from constructions of God that further oppress us (them) and that condone violence on the basis of gender, race, class, sexuality, and othering.”<sup>39</sup>

Looking forward even to the next generation of womanist and Black Female Clergy, full transparency may be helpful in safe spaces with another Black Female Clergy. Emilie Townes wrote, “The collective experience of Black women, like the experience of any group, can inform and challenge the dominant world view.”<sup>40</sup> In order to achieve this great accomplishment Black Female Clergy must pause to “not only to celebrate her heritage, but take a long, hard look at it.”<sup>41</sup> Contained within the great heritage of Black Female Clergy is a greater silence that threatens its continued livelihood. Townes contributes her thoughts of the silence that plagues the ongoing history of womanism by noting, “Silence in the face of injustice and oppression can be complicit in those very forces and systems that diminish life and wholeness while giving the

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Katie G. Cannon, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Angela D. Sims, *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, 1st ed., Library of theological ethics. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

illusion of survival. A womanist understands the survival and freedom to be interconnected with the well-being of the community.”<sup>42</sup> One possible contributing factor to silence and the reason Black Female Clergy pursue careers outside of ministry could be “the challenge over the years for us (Black Female Clergy) has been having to write, teach, theorize, and practice our hermeneutics amid obstacles designed to keep us as women distracted, silent, and forever beginning anew.”<sup>43</sup>

To balance out the bitter taste of silence Black Female Clergy experience from their ministry contexts, I wanted to incorporate an enticing motivation for breaking silence – liberation as I believe it will serve as the driving force that brings about awareness that fuels change. Townes notes “Liberation requires that each person acquire an attitudinal mind-set that refuses to accept any external restraint that would deny her or him the right of being. Implicit in this is a strong self-affirmation that cannot be challenged successfully by any external force.”<sup>44</sup> She marries reconciliation with liberation and believes the two could serve as the response for “the experience of African-American women in this country and in churches.”<sup>45</sup>

## **THEOLOGICAL**

Womanist Theology begins its analysis by understanding the lived experiences of African American women, including the ways in which they experience

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<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Cannon, Townes, and Sims, *Womanist Theological Ethics*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

oppression and the ways in which they find hope and exercise agency in the midst of oppression.<sup>46</sup>

Lastly but most importantly I reflect upon Queen Esther personally through my context of Black Female Clergy. Esther's charge and invitation to no longer remain silent is still being heard throughout our lands today; I especially hear it in my ears as I can see the demise of my own race of Black Female Clergy answering their call to ministry. Threatened by the silence and stress of traditions of patriarchy, it is easy to want to buckle under pressure – to want to stay silent and live to see another day. And then I look backwards and consider the first Black Female Clergy who walked heavy and preached the word despite oppression and depression. I am grateful for how their efforts cleared a path for me to be present today. And then I look forward to my daughter and wonder what amazing things God will call her to; I do not want the legacy of future Black Female Clergy to perish because I did not take advantage of this opportunity to speak up and out for Black Female Clergy. I share Weller's sentiment of everything and everyone [every Black Female Clergy] has a right to continue, to reach forward into untold generations, keeping the dreams of our children .... alive."<sup>47</sup>

As a Black Female Clergy in a Protestant Black church in the south, I can attest to similar conditions Esther endured from the previous commentators. Unfortunately, today still poses challenges and battles with various isms and abuses of power; I must attain twice as many degrees and certifications to get half the attention, exposure, and opportunities to preach that my other non-Black Female Clergy counterparts will get. And no matter how educated I am, I am

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<sup>46</sup> Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Weller and Lerner, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, 144.

still be judged according to my beauty, docility, and obedience - or rebellion for being adamant about pursuing God's call. I continue to speak out in this space and others and cry out to save the legacy of Black Female Clergy who are in seminary questioning their call, contemplating giving up, and/or in need of a shoulder to cry on or safe space to rest. I have used my platform to preach and teach others way to re-imagine text that includes them and challenge and invite other proclaim others to do the same, not just on designated Sundays for mothers and women but as often as God allows.

But, as morally and ethically responsible biblical interpreters, we can bear witness to the plight of these girls and women whose names we will never know. We can stand with those impacted by sexual violence and exploitation throughout history and up to the present day, as we commit to read between the lines, behind the euphemisms, and through the silences and silencing in the biblical text and in narrated stories of Africana girls and women across time and space. In doing so, we may not redeem the biblical text, but we will redeem the stories and dignity of all the girls and women whose voices have too often been silenced.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah*, 120.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONTEXTS AND METHODOLOGY

Davidson County is one of one hundred counties in North Carolina and was formed from Rowan County in 1822 after General William Lee Davidson.<sup>1</sup> It is situated in an area called the “Piedmont Triad” between the Blue Ridge mountains and many beaches that make up the Atlantic Ocean and is 552.68 square miles (about twice the area of Austin, Texas) in size. Its county seat is the city Lexington which was settled in 1775 and incorporated in 1828.<sup>2</sup> The city was named after the place where the shot was “heard around the world,” Lexington, Massachusetts in 1775. Davidson County has sustained its economy through agriculture, mining, and most notably through furniture and textile production in Lexington and Thomasville.<sup>3</sup> In addition to furniture, Lexington has been believed to be the “barbeque capital of North Carolina” as its annual Barbecue Festival held every October brings in hundreds of thousands of new “foodies” each year.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663-1943 :: State Publications II,” <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p16062coll9/id/290103>.

<sup>2</sup> Website design and web development by Mango Web Design <http://mangowebdesign.com>, “Davidson County (1822),” *North Carolina History Project*, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/davidson-county-1822/>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663-1943 | David Leroy Corbitt,” *University of North Carolina Press*, <https://uncpress.org/book/9780865260320/the-formation-of-the-north-carolina-counties-1663-1943>.

<sup>4</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Lexington City, North Carolina,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/lexingtoncitynorthcarolina/PST045218>.

Davidson County’s estimated population according to the 2018 was 166,614 and is distributed as follows: 86.1% White, 9.8% Black or African American, and 0.8% Native American, 1.6% Asian, 0.1%, Pacific Islander, and 1.7% two or more races. 7.2% of any race is Hispanic/Latino.<sup>5</sup> Lexington’s population is approximately 19,000 and its land area is approximately 18 miles. The racial composition was 48% White 30% Black, 3.30% Asian, 3.74% other races, 0.32% Native American, and 3.71% two or more races.<sup>6</sup> The Median household income is \$28,669 with 31% of the population living below the poverty line. (42% of children under the age of 18 and 14% of seniors 65 and older).

### **CONGREGATION: HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The First Baptist Church is a Black congregation located on Village Drive in the city of Lexington, NC. It is one of two First Baptist Churches in the city and is referred to by local citizens as the “Black First Baptist.” Missionary Baptist in faith, the church was birthed following the national “great revival” taking place around the 1860’s.<sup>7</sup> The church has a rich history that has been handed down through generations and this collection of memories is shared with members through artifacts and curriculum workbooks for new members. Worship began in 1867 with a few men and women slaves that gathered with a desire to organize a Baptist church for other Black worshippers in the community. Harry Cowan and Zack Horton were the first ministers to lead this effort. They later extended beyond their leadership in the community to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Census Profile: Lexington, NC,” *Census Reporter*, <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3738060-lexington-nc/>.

<sup>7</sup> First Baptist Church, “First Baptist Church: A New Members Workbook” (Poeima Christian Resources, 2019).

become founding members of the Rowan Baptist Association – one of the oldest and still functioning bodies to date.<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, the members successfully negotiated for a parcel of land on Church Street, and Summer Hill was born. The church was initially named this because of the elevation of the land and its surrounding landscape. Rev. Zack Horton served as the church's first pastor of this church from 1867 – 1880. Summer Hill grew during six decades under the leadership of seven pastors and shifted from being a church with afternoon services on second and fourth Sundays to a “station church” where they offered weekly Sunday morning worship in the 1920s. It was destroyed by fire in 1936, and with the help of Pastor A.T. Evans the youth of the church helped replace the new church using bricks and other building materials salvaged from the fire.<sup>9</sup> Along with the physical changes, Summer Hill became First Baptist church and over the course of years First Baptist Church was called the “mother church” as other churches were birthed from its membership. It was also through Evan's leadership the church was also noted for beginning to reach out to the community through its religious, cultural, and recreational programs. Through these efforts there was an expansion of the local swimming pool, full-time programs of arts and crafts, organized sports, and the first “Cub Scout Troop” for Black people.

After World War II and much extensive work done for the church and community Rev. Evans was the first to retire as pastor of First Baptist Church in 1969. The church was relocated to its current location, south of downtown Lexington, in 1973. The church has experienced its

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<sup>8</sup> “J. A. Whitted, b. 1860. A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina.” <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/whitted/whitted.html>.

<sup>9</sup> First Baptist Church, “First Baptist Church: A New Members Workbook.”

share of highs and lows through changes of leadership and congregation but has proven resilient and made the necessary adjustments to continue providing spiritual care to those in need. Currently, the church is in the middle of transition and has been under the direction of an Interim Pastor for more than 3 years.

### **CONGREGATION: MINISTRY CONTEXT**

In the one hundred fifty-four years since its inception, First Baptist Church has remained a staple for the African American community. It is still the only Black owned on-site five-star childcare center in the city with afterschool and summer programs, offers fellowship space for town hall meetings and other civic and social events, and a place of worship for approximately 50 active members since re-opening the doors post COVID-19. The average age of the congregation is 60 with most of the members near or actively retired. The church's demographic shifted because of the COVID-19 pandemic with the return of the congregation's youth and young undetermined.

The ministries, boards, and committees that previously existed for the needs for the logistical and operational aspects of the church have dwindled except for the usher, health, and wellness (COVID-19 related screening and occasional blood pressure checks), Deacon, and Trustee ministries. My responsibilities have included oversight for both the Christian Education and Congregational Care ministries; both have operated virtually since the pandemic primarily for Bible Study, intercessory prayer, and sick and shut-in visits.

Our Interim Pastor created an Executive Committee to serve in an advisory capacity for the Deacon, Trustee, Pastoral and Administrative, and Childcare Board ministries. It was the hope that this effort would help create transparency, develop trust between ministries, and

promote effective communication throughout the church. This committee was also responsible for updating the church's bylaws and other policies and procedures and improving financial stewardship. Prior to COVID-19, my primary roles include research and development, coordination of seasonal worship events (revival, church anniversary, etc.), administrative back up for the Pastor, and facilitation of the ministry leadership retreat. These leadership experiences afforded me opportunities to connect with members in a more intimate way and share the love of Christ to them in their times of need. Over time, I managed to gain respect from the congregation in a pastoral capacity. A few of the members finally arrived at a place where they comfortably, respectfully, and affectionately referred to me as "Pastor Pam," or "Reverend Mitchell" while others, sadly in leadership, would still address me as they would lay members of our congregation. Despite having the same or more credentials than Black Male Clergy in the congregation, I was still not being fully supported as a Black Female Clergy by the members.

### **MINISTRY CONTEXT: BLACK FEMALE CLERGY**

Being a Black Female Clergy became my ministry context for my project because it addresses the intersectionality and greatest issue within my congregation and community. I have noticed both in my congregational context and Protestant Black churches throughout Lexington and the greater Davidson County area that there are many strong Black women in these congregations but very few Black Female Clergy serving as leaders in them. I want to make a distinction between Black Female Clergy and Black women in ministry, especially in this geographical location. There are Black women who are dedicated to service within their congregations. These women may have taken their leadership duties to another level and have been licensed to preach and/or assist their pastor with Sunday morning worship. They tend not to

desire opportunities in or beyond their congregation to preach regularly or operate in their pastoral authority; they are content with administrative tasks and filling in on events and themes (Mother's/Women's Day) catered to the women of the church. This is a marked difference from Black Female Clergy; women who are seminary trained and actively serving in congregational and/or any other ministerial capacity such as a Chaplain or other spiritual caregiver. My decision to add seminary training to this definition of Black Female Clergy is admittedly biased based on personal experience. I have found Black women in ministry less supportive of my call to ministry more critical of my role. These women consider themselves more "traditional" and prefer male pastors and pastoral leadership. I have come to accept and later appreciate the distinction since attending seminary and connecting with Black Female Clergy with similar goals and call to ministry.

Eighty-Three percent of the ministry contexts represented in this study are in southeastern part of the United States. Their active congregation size ranges from 20 – 200. 66.7% of their congregations are under the leadership of male Senior Pastors and 33% of the group serve as the Senior Pastors for their congregation. 100% of the participants have had consistent opportunities to preach both in their congregations and as guest speakers throughout their region. The Black Female Clergy in the study are aware of their call to ministry and more specifically congregational ministry. They responded to the call and had opportunities to use their gifts to minister in ways authentic to them. Each participant candidly shared with the group specific experiences that helped shape their identity within their congregations. Most of the Black Female Clergy serve as the only females on their Ministerial staff or are the only ones with formal seminary training. Each participant has varying levels of support from the pastors, leaders, and

general membership that impacts their commitments to their call, congregations, and communities they serve.

### **MINISTRY: CHALLENGE**

Most of my issues since Black Female Clergy have stemmed from my “home church.” This congregation has been the pillar of faith beginning with my maternal side of my family; my grandmother served and reared her children there and my mother raised me and my siblings, and I followed the same tradition. I was away from the church for a season, but always had the desire for me to return “home” to my mother's church. The church has been affectionately referred to as the “mother” to other churches and filled with mothers who were incredibly involved in the day-to-day activities. Despite the extensive female presence and leadership, it has historically been and continues to be led by older Black Senior Pastors and male chairpersons since its inception.

This trend began to shift around 2000 and the church experienced unprecedented changes. In 2004 the church voted on the youngest pastor and from that sparked an increase in Black female leadership within the congregation. In 2015, two Black women were licensed and ordained by the church and later added to the ministerial staff. While I was inspired with this forward movement and participated more, I could not help but feel as if every time I attended service that I had stepped back into a time point very unfamiliar to me. This “feeling” left me questioning my call to ministry. After much hesitation, I decided to finally answer my call in 2016 and to my surprise the congregation was excited with my decision. In hindsight it was more because they wanted to be known as “affirming” of women in ministry and less about having a Black Female Clergy serving in the congregation. This theory was quickly proved as I began

receiving pushback after assuming leadership roles over ministries and projects previously held by my male counterparts.

There was a continued decline in participation of ministries with women chairpersons and an exodus of Black women in ministry. I felt betrayed and abandoned with losing my comradery and support from the other women in leadership. This same effect is evidenced in surrounding churches in Davidson County. There has only been one Black Female Senior Pastor in Lexington who was been appointed to a Methodist congregation and continues to serve a decade later. Other churches closely affiliated with First Baptist Church have Black women in ministry, I am the only Black Female Clergy in the area. I have continued to faithfully serve despite the silence I have endured that includes being overlooked for recently vacated churches in the area, asked to allow other male ministers to come preach during Sunday's I was scheduled to preach, and being offered honorariums less than the male musicians for the service. I had reached my breaking point by remaining silent about these unfair instances taking place within the congregation. It was time for me to finally speak these truths that were the source of great pain and stress in my life. It was vital that my project addressed the greatest challenge in my ministry – I needed to create a space for confrontational truth telling and find other Black Female Clergy to share this space with. I finally needed to know whether this silence resided only within me.

Black Female Clergy experience rejection in their congregations more times than not when it comes to filling a pulpit assignment. Rejection then becomes a form of silence because despite their qualifications, their gifts are withheld, and their voices are not heard proclaiming the Good News most Sunday mornings. Being rejected and remaining silent creates a cause for them to consider leaving their church “homes.” They become “refugees” and leave their

ministries “all together or move around from church to church seeking to have their call affirmed.”<sup>10</sup> Other pressures that contribute to silence very early in a Black Female Clergy’s journey include sexism, denominational bias, lack of on-the-job training and experience, doctrinal and societal prejudice and it leads to unhealthy competition, undue stress, bitterness, and poor professional self-image.”<sup>11</sup> My project holds my personal experiences closely with other Black Female Clergy who have shared their stories and can recall times of feeling “stifled, discouraged and/or bitter” and ultimately thinking of abandoning my “sense of call in the face of gatekeepers, opposition or indifference.”<sup>12</sup>

My preliminary research for Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black churches yielded limited results. I am however encouraged by the literature and reflections emerging from Black Female Clergy currently in academic theological circles. There are some who have begun to narrate their experiences and shed light on the biased nature of the Protestant Black church and church universal.<sup>13</sup> These findings were reported to show the increasing rate of Black Female Clergy enrolled in seminaries that are actively pursuing ordained ministry that does not correlate

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<sup>10</sup> Arlene Paulette Robinson Birchett, “Bitter to Better: Engaging American Baptist African-American Women Clergy to Mentor African-American Women on the Path to Ordination” (D.Min., Drew University, 2013), <https://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1520011870/abstract/57B586014EC84D8BPQ/1.12>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Cannon, Townes, and Sims, *Womanist Theological Ethic*, 50.

with the low percentage of Black Female Clergy serving as Senior Pastors and Congregational leaders.<sup>14</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

“Like any ritual sacrament, these concealed gatherings have an intrinsically powerful sacramental character. Through certain meaningful signs, we cooperate in a shared process. We look backward to past events, we celebrate the present moment of life, we look forward to the future. This process is enabled by commonly accepted language, bodily gestures, and behaviors. Women bring their bodies to the sacramental experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Rituals and sacraments occur as a way of communicating with the divine. These events are spiritual encounters experienced among like-minded individuals. I wanted to use my ministry project to create a concealed gathering for other Black Female Clergy to facilitate discussion where the participants are allowed to share their firsthand experiences of serving as congregational leaders in Protestant Black churches. My goal was to find Black Female Clergy currently serving in the southeastern region of the country because I am not aware of many Black Female Clergy leading historical Black churches in the south. Based on my previous positive encounters with other Black Female Clergy in seminary, I chose a peer group interview method for a qualitative analysis. Focus groups allow for group interaction, and the “cooperation of the group” should yield better results and be less time consuming than individual interviews with Black Female Clergy.<sup>16</sup> Sensing warns that not only will this method “hinder individual

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<sup>14</sup> Birchett, “Bitter to Better,” 19.

<sup>15</sup> Westfield, *Dear Sisters*, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Or. : Wipf & Stock: Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 120.

expression,” but it is also possible to produce skewed results.<sup>17</sup> He continues, depending on the players and influence of the group there could be some members that will go along with the popular response and not provide their input. I paired this knowledge with convenience sampling to prevent as many opportunities to flaw the result as possible and remain open to the results the study produces. The people I chose I knew were seminary trained, served in pastoral capacities, and have at some point wrestled with their calls to ministry yet are still serving in Protestant Black churches.

Due to the sensitive nature of discussion, I wanted to create an intimate gathering space and will invite a small convenience sample of five to eight Black Female Clergy to participate. Black Female Clergy for this project must be Women who identify as Black and have been licensed and/or ordained (depending on their denomination and whether they ordain women). They must have completed seminary training and were willing to share their experiences with other Black Female Clergy in the group. Individuals who did not identify as Black females, complete seminary, or served as a ministry leader in a Protestant Black Church were excluded from participating. After the participants accepted the offer and the proper documentation completed, they were offered a \$25.00 DoorDash Credit for a meal of their choosing as a courtesy for their participation in the peer group interview.

I designed this project with the assumption that other Black Female Clergy have been exposed to, aware of, and would be willing to break their previous silence. I established an intentional space to connection with other Black Female Clergy to promote an open sharing of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,120.

their congregational leadership experiences in Protestant Black churches. Built within this project were opportunities for me to provide a ministry of presence for Black Female Clergy as needed while the group explored and identified emotions that arose during the interview or access impact of the responses shared by each participant.

A virtual space was created for the interview using a Zoom platform. This was done to ensure adequate participation without the concern of participants living and working within a reasonable radius and schedules that accommodate the meeting. Each participant was randomly provided with pseudonyms prior to the interview and was used for duration. I selected the pseudonyms based on an Ebony article entitled “Hidden Black History: 7 African Queens Who Have Made Their Mark”.<sup>18</sup> These queens Nefertiti, Amina, Yaa, Kandake, Ana, Nandi, and Makeda were all powerful Black leaders, and these names create a parallel to the powerful Black Female Clergy who will participate in the study. Participants were instructed to address one another using the name provided. Participants will also be asked to attend peer group session alone in an uninterrupted location (i.e.: home or office). This will help to further ensure their privacy and the privacy of others in the group.

Additional details from participants were omitted from the interview and transcript. To further protect these participants' information I obtained, I have dedicated space to secure the data for up to three years. Originally the interview with the participants was set to last approximately three (3) hours with questions I created based upon my own personal reflections

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<sup>18</sup> “Hidden Black History: 7 African Queens Who Have Made Their Mark • EBONY,” *EBONY*, February 21, 2022, accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/7-african-queens-history/>.

with silence as a Black Female Clergy and what it means to break it. After providing the group with a detailed agenda that explained the goals of the group coupled with the ask and risks associated with participating in the Black Female Clergy, I shifted forward to ask them to share their experiences with silence related to being a Black Female Clergy within their church and/or current professions.

My questions were motivated by and similar to a series of questions Khang submits as one transitions from a place of silence to speaking up. She asks, "What issues do you care most deeply about? Identify what compels you to speak up. What people, problems, dreams, and values are near and dear to your heart? What things make you angry and question humanity? Where do you find hope? Another thing to consider is what issue is pulling at your heart and soul so much that it might make you do something you never thought you would do?"<sup>19</sup> My questions invited the participants to reflect on their call, seminary, and professional experiences. I was interested to learn their spiritual autobiographies and defining moments that led to their silence. I held space with them as they discussed hardships they have endured or "ministry setbacks" that contributed to bitterness, feelings of emptiness, and ultimately silence."<sup>20</sup> I did my best to generate open-ended questions for the group that would

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<sup>19</sup> Kang, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Arlene Paulette Robinson Birchett, "Bitter to Better: Engaging American Baptist African-American Women Clergy to Mentor African-American Women on the Path to Ordination" (D.Min., Drew University, 2013), <https://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1520011870/abstract/57B586014EC84D8BPQ/1.9>.

not indicate own implicit biases in order to collect authentic responses, patterns, and themes associated with silence that I perceive occurs within the Black Female Clergy culture.

Each participant received the questions at the same time during the interview and were invited to participate as they feel comfortable doing so. Ample time was allotted for individual responses and collective discussion. While I did not anticipate any degree of discomfort or harm throughout the interview process, I had some contingences in place in the event any participant becomes triggered during the interview. The participants were continuously reminded that their participation is voluntary, and they could leave the interview at any point during the interview. I had separate virtual spaces designated apart from the group (via breakout rooms) in case the participants needed to shift to regroup and/or speak with me individually. My credentials and previous coursework in preparation for this research study include Master of Divinity degree, completion of four units of Clinical Pastoral Education from the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, and Board-Certified Chaplain through the Association of Professional Chaplains.

The virtual interview is recorded using IRB approved software and applications. The data was audio recorded and transcribed, and coded for relevance, patterns or themes that coincided with silence as experienced among the participants. Qualitative research software was evaluated and purchased for use in this project. Participants were contacted individually for clarification of responses or follow-up questions.

The day of the interview began with an introductory section which covered general housekeeping for the group. I ensured each participant was familiar with the virtual platform selected (Zoom) and laid out the general rules for participation. A baseline explanation of silence and the occurrence of it with Black Female Clergy in ministry was provided. I also used the

interview as a moment to share parts of my own experiences with the participants. I did that to show them my stake in this experience and that I stood to gain and lose as much as they did from this experience if we each did not do our part to protect this sacred space.

I also used the introductory period to also explain my contingency plan should anyone become triggered by any narratives shared in the interview. My plan included a separate “break out room” to immediately send the participant and join them to further assess their needs (whether to continue with the interview or exit after assessment). Finally, I thanked them again for their purely voluntary participation in the interview and reminded them there was no pressure or obligation to continue before proceeding further. I informed the participants of the possibility of me contacting them after the interview for clarification and provided my own contact information should they need to contact me.

I facilitated discussion of the theme of silence and a free sharing of individual experiences in a manner that allowed a fair amount of time devoted to the questions generated based on the interests previously mentioned (related to themes of silence, seminary, and serving in their ministry context). Ample time was allotted to reflect on each question before responding and any follow-up questions that may surface. Once the collective understanding of my goals for the project, we naturally shifted to the interview. The participants were invited to share their responses as often as they wanted to and were free to answer as many questions as they wanted to comment on. There was no predetermined order for the participants to follow when engaging in discussion, and I moved to the next question when I deemed the topic or question no longer warranted discussion. I remained open to revisiting popular topics as requested during the interview.

I spent the concluding section of the interview to check in with the participants individually and collectively as my way of providing pastoral care for Black Female Clergy. I recognized that our conversation could potentially produce some feelings and emotions that were not present at the start of our venture together. I designated space for each participant to safely debrief from our interaction and process any new findings within among fellow laborers in ministry. It was my hope that wrapping our session together in this way would be both vital and beneficial for any new connections made during the interview and determined the likelihood of the participants being open to future meetings with other Black Female Clergy. I gained valuable feedback from both the participants and the interview process itself that now informs my future ministry projects and research considerations.

I must note that my project is not just about a discussion of silence with Black Female Clergy. I also hope to discuss Black Female Clergy experiences as it relates to their 'call story' or journey through ministry. I believe that despite discussing the hard and hurtful situations we face as Black Female Clergy it is equally important to always know and remember the "why" we do what we do and "Who" has called us to do it. I also hope to uncover more about why road to pastoring a church or serving in senior leadership remains untraveled by Black Female Clergy despite our calling. Unfortunately, I have not been able to access much research that weighs in on my wondering. What little literature that is available only mentions how Black Female Clergy's journey not being without struggle which is something most Black Female Clergy

already know getting into it.<sup>21</sup> I hope to use this project and the findings from it to bring attention to this matter and contribute to it.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 10.

## CHAPTER 4

### NO LONGER REMAINING SILENT INTERVIEW

My interview initially consisted of seven Black Female Clergy. Each participant was selected as a part of a convenience sample; meaning I knew them or knew of them through close associations. All participants were qualified to participate according to the project's protocol because they identified as Black Females who had been licensed to minister, ordained (as their denominations allowed) and completed formal training at divinity school or seminary. All participants have served in ministerial leadership and signed the necessary documentation to participate in the study. They also understood that the process was voluntary and that they could exit the interview at any time.

I indicated previously that each participant would randomly receive a pseudonym to use upon entry to the virtual platform. The groups names were chosen based on a recent Ebony Magazine article entitled "Hidden Black History: 7 African Queens Who Have Made Their Mark".<sup>1</sup> This title was appropriate to me and equally as important as the participants in this study are each of them have and are continuing to make their mark in ministry. And unfortunately, like the title implies, there are times that their skills and abilities to minister are hidden to protestant Black churches. Ebony spanned the entire continent of Africa and highlighted the following queen and the territories they reigned in: Nefertiti of Ancient Egypt, Amina of Zaira, Yaa Asantewaa, also known as Queen Mother, of the Ashanti Empire, Kandake

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<sup>1</sup> "Hidden Black History: 7 African Queens Who Have Made Their Mark • EBONY," <https://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/7-african-queens-history/>.

Amani Renas of the Kingdom of Kush, Ana Nzinga of Mbande Ndogo, Nandi of the Zulu Kingdom, and Makeda, also known as the Queen of Sheba, of Ethiopia. After sharing their names and significance of the group, everyone began to refer to one another on a first name basis (I.e., Yaa Asantewaa was referred to as Yaa) for the remainder of the interview. Unfortunately, Yaa was unable to complete the interview for personal reasons and her responses will not be included in the findings.

### **GROUP STATISTICS**

It is my top priority to protect the identity of each Black Female Clergy that participated in the focus group. With that goal in mind, I have only provided demographics most needed and helpful in understanding the results from the interview. 50% of the participants are currently affiliated with Baptist denominations 33.3% Presbyterian, and 16.7% identify as non-denominational. 83.3% of the participants were raised in a Baptist congregation and 16.7% in an grew up in an Apostolic congregation. 33.3% of the group is currently married and have served with their spouses who are also are currently active in congregational leadership and 66.7% are single. 33.3% of the participants have made a career as Pastor of their congregation, 50% of the participants serve on the ministerial staff in their current congregations, and 16.7% have recently stepped down from their ministerial staff position for personal reasons. Of the 66.7% not employed with a congregation 16.7% are full-time students pursuing a graduate seminary, 16.7% are homemakers, and the remaining 33.3% have secular careers in the non-profit sector. And lastly 66.7% of the participants were born and raised in the south, 16.7% would be considered a transplant – they were born outside of the southeastern region, relocated, and are ministering in the south. The remaining 16.7% were born in the south but raised in the north and later returned

to serve in a congregation in the south. 83.3% of the participants are under the age of 60 and all the participants have been Black Female Clergy for at least five years. 66.7% of the participants are a part of a legacy of ministers and of this number 16.7% comes from a lineage of female ministry.

### **RESPONSES TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Of the ten questions previously prepared for the study to engage silence, only five of them were asked and two questions were inadvertently answered by some of the participants during their response to other questions. 67% of the participants provided their thoughts about Black Female Clergy serving in a leadership capacity. Nefertiti openly shared that even while serving as Pastor in of congregation they have still had moments growing up where she questioned their leadership because she had not seen them in that capacity until her, she changed denominations. She is still new to her role but is becoming more comfortable operating in her pastoral authority and incredibly supportive of fellow Black Female Clergy Pastors. Ana reported having a more consistent acceptance and support of Black Female Clergy in leadership prior to stepping into her role. The general response from the others in the group reflect a “wrestle” within themselves with both seeing and being Black Female Clergy. This is due in part because their historical congregations did not begin to ordain female ministers until recently.

These findings complimented their call stories as they shared what it was like to hear the call from God and then explain their call to their family and ministers. Many of them, like myself, were very hesitant about pursuing their call; in fact, Kandake even shared how she remained silent about her call for a period and instead pursued other career ventures. Nandi revealed her call was never questioned by her church, but they planned for her calling and gifts

to be used to help support her spouse in his role. Amina's call came in her teenage and early adult years, and she has been faithfully ministering in an itinerate pastor to congregations upon request. It was refreshing to see periods of laughter and smiles from the participants when they resonated with others' call story and contributed more when something said sparked another memory for them.

Sixty-six point seven percent (66.7%) of the participants feel closely aligned with their calling and they are actively engaged in congregational ministry. Actively engaged does not denote they are happily serving; it comes with their fair share of burdens (discussed in detail later in this section). 50% of this group have recently considered leaving their current congregation to pursue other opportunities in ministry. 100% of the 33.3% are content with in their positions that are outside of ministry and do not feel as aligned with their call. They also do not feel led yet to make the necessary adjustments. 33% of the participants have completed Clinical Pastoral Education requirements that could make them eligible for Chaplaincy positions should they consider that as a career opportunity.

Concealed gatherings are also sacred space because truth can be spoken there. This disclosed truth is a truth that is prohibited in the presence of White people and in the presence of Black men.<sup>2</sup>

N. Lynne Westfield speaks about a type of hospitality specific to and very needed for Black Female Clergy. "Concealed gatherings" appropriately define the space required for Black Female Clergy to feel protected enough to temporarily lay down the burdens of this world. Not only do we become the holder of secrets within familial circles, as clergy we gain access to

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<sup>2</sup> Westfield, *Dear Sisters*. 89.

private matters in our congregation that the public is not privy to. Because the mantle we carry is very heavy and valuable, it cannot be unloaded in open spaces where it can be easily accessed. I became grateful for our protected virtual space as the questions began to intensify. I received varying answers to the question of how supported each participant felt as Black Female Clergy. Ana's initial response indicating she felt a lack of support in this role and asks herself, "like how much is enough, especially when you know women are strong." She proceeds to give a specific example of how she helped bail her church out of a fiscal crisis only to still be questioned by the board when she makes financial decisions. After reflecting on all her sources of support, she returned to this topic and added that she feels very supported by her spiritual father and her brothers. Amina's sphere of support stood out from the group because she has always felt "protected by pastor." She has also received a tremendous amount of male colleague support; Amina feels privileged to be in such environments knowing that this is not always the case for Black Female Clergy. Amina specifies that the support from her colleagues is "not just private support, but public support that created opportunities for her to serve freely." That at times creates a moment of silence for her because sometimes she "feels afraid to name because she has not had that struggle."

Hospitality creates a safe place for the speaking out loud of forbidden tales, forbidden truths. It is a time of unguardedness.... There's no phoniness, there's no "I have to watch what I say." It's not a guarded time. It's just the time to let your hair down and be yourself. <sup>3</sup>

Westfield's discussion of hospitality highlights the benefits of concealed gatherings.

There was a moment in the interview where I could envision some of the participants letting

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 93.

down their guard and choosing to trust the group and the interview process. I witnessed them begin to shift from an extended period of silence to forming words that spoke the truth of their experiences. None of the participants who responded reported a healthy level of support from their pastors but did indicate that their support comes from Black Female Clergy who are also serving as their mentors. Nefertiti shared an experience where she was assigned a supportive presence who ended up being a hinderance to Nefertiti accomplishing her goals. As she shared her disappointment and frustration with that incident, I watched as the others in the group held space with her both audibly and visibly. It was amazing to see the ways they communicated support to her (public chats, facial expressions, emojis) and even more so to see Nefertiti appear to be consoled in that moment.

Nandi contributed to the discussion regarding the lack of support Black Female Clergy receive from their congregation. She said instead of there being a “championing coming from the groups of people who should have been supportive they place obstacles in our path.” This response prompted a clarifying question of who are these “people” (male or female)? The unsurprising collective response was that Black Female Clergy get more pushbacks, setups, and obstacles from other Black women who are not in ministry. The other source of resistance came from senior leadership (male pastors).

### **THEMES OF SILENCE**

If a woman’s authentic self has been devalued in her relationships, in childhood learning, and in impoverished stereotypes of feminist, the authentic self becomes silent to protect the integrity of its own vision.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Crowley Jack. 139.

Crowley Jack's discussion of a woman's authentic self and silence was displayed following discussion of Black Female Clergy lacking support the support they seek from the people they expected to receive it from. The participants collectively began to discuss reasons why they have remained silent about not feeling supported and chose not to speak against the faces and forces that have been hindrances and shown resistance to their call. Ana and Nandi responded that silence comes out of frustration and being tired of having to "jump through hoops [10:1 ratio] as opposed to doors being opened for male colleagues." Nefertiti and others commented that they have remained silent because they have grown tired and weary of always having to produce even with impeccable track records of being efficient and reliable. Kandake shared that there have been times she has remained silent because she is not getting paid (or paid enough) for her service and does not find it worth speaking up about. The group collectively described other factors that contribute to them not feeling supported and why they continue to remain silent: they have been overlooked, afraid of the consequences, annoyed, and felt like a sacrificial lamb. As a result of these reasons, 50% of the group are considering abandoning the call and working in spaces (i.e., Amazon) that will pay well and appreciate them in a way the church does not. Some may not be quite ready to leave but as previously mentioned are avoiding preaching engagements and congregation assignments altogether, and/or are considering other denominations and congregations (mixed and predominantly white) that are more affirming of their ministry. They feel more comfortable with exploring their full potential as ministers because they are welcome to do so and feel better received by the recipients of their pastoral care. And yet there are some that just continue to wear their masks and act as if everything is okay even when it is not. I enjoyed the bittersweet comradery taking shape during the interview -

it was great to see the women's faces brighten up when they realized they were not the only ones with experiences that embodied Westfield's hospitality:

They let me know I am not alone. Safe. You know because these are people who have kind of been there. I don't have to explain why I feel the way I feel about whatever. You kind of complete each other's sentences and that kind of stuff. Someone has been there, done that hated it or loved it – whatever the "it" is. Or at least known somebody. And we have shared cultures so that you don't have to struggle through redefining or making definitions or all that crap, and it's truly a place where you can be yourself, because you are not playing games one way or the other. It's kinda like being with your mom when you were a kid, and she knew you better than you knew yourself.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, it was sad to realize that these stories of silence primarily exist among Black Female Clergy and that these outcomes severely impact our decision to pursue our call to ministry. I understood the importance of making these stories known to prepare the future generations of Black Female Clergy for their journey ahead and to reach out to other Black Female Clergy suffering in silence and let them know they do not have to navigate these experiences alone.

I was especially grateful for the married Black Female Clergy who shared their experiences with silent both with church and at times at home about the silence with the church. This perspective shows how further complicated the Black Female Clergy can get. Kandake shared the frustration of trying to find a "balance of doing ministry in a stereotypical role and then answering who God has called you to be." Her silence led her to start "cosigning everything others in the church said. Nandi lifted how she began her silence because the church felt "I needed to support the male clergy spouse in with her role." This can become draining as the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94.

church will further place these professionally qualified Black Female Clergy capable of senior pastor leadership into more traditional roles ranging from becoming the First Lady or settling to in second chair to her spouse in ministries within a greater congregation.

Letting your hair down” i.e., unmasking and disclosing one’s true self is at the heart of gatherings. Reciprocity of self-disclosure is the hospitality of self for African American women, i.e., “the story of sharing uncovers deeply buried pain; brings relief from fruitless acts of denial; awakens joy in the discovery of companions who are one with them in suffering and struggle; provokes rage over the irrationality and arbitrariness of the structures of oppression; heightens a determination to resist to the uttermost any further humiliation and degradation.”<sup>6</sup>

As the participants began to “let their hair down” and share deeper, other adjectives associated with silence began to surface during the interview like heavy, triggering, sensitive, real, and traumatic. Kandake felt triggered because she was beginning to feel all kinds of emotions as the group was sharing and her memories started to surface. The thing that was most triggering was that she “sat silent” through them. Others felt heavy and mentioned feeling insecure about keeping silent and the silent treatment they were receiving from non-Black Female Clergy. They “couldn’t conceive how God would even want to use them” and wished “God was wrong with continuing to call them into these spaces.” The silence itself became more stressful to wrestle with and then another level of silence began to surround them. Even the thought of breaking the silence and exposing the back door discussions and open disrespect from members is an extremely sensitive subject and one that the group thinks is better to continue with the devil they knew.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 94.

Kandake described what she called a “private silence;” one where her silence created a struggle where she felt she could no longer waste her life or God’s time. And her struggle was “real” because she does not want to play with her calling because it too is very real to her. 33% of the participants described an “inner turmoil” as they dealt with remaining silent and how they did not want to blame anyone else for what they were experiencing. They also spoke of an outer turmoil that accompanied this feeling because it was not fair that others were “free to move about” unaffected by their silence. There was a universal acceptance and understanding of how silence feels “real” without being able to successfully define it. One brave participant even disclosed “Sometimes I have been my own hindrance and my own silencer.” We closed this segment of the interview with a discussion of how silence is traumatic. The consensus (without exposing any congregations) is that there is a “socio-historical culture within Black church, within congregations that continue to haunt and taunt women who are trying to move the church forward.” Most of the group agreed that “It’s our very own people (Black people) that causes the trauma we experience through church drama silences.”

Concealed gatherings make space for the voicing of opinions that have been shouted down, for the voicing of facts that have been twisted, for the voicing of woundedness that has been denied, denounced, and disavowed.<sup>7</sup>

I became even more grateful for our private discussion and the vulnerability and transparency it produced. Our initial light-hearted discussion of disrespect took an unplanned turn and answered a question that I did not formally ask but the group responded. The silence that surrounds disrespect stems mostly from the male clergy colleagues. It begins with an

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 90.

inappropriate comment or too much attention paid to clothing, etc. and it can later grow into inappropriate advances, late phone calls, and/or unwanted requests for meals, etc. One participant spoke of a Pastor who used his assistant to fish for the things she like so that he could court her. The assistant had led her to believe that he was pursuing her and when she learned the truth of the scenario, she quickly lost respect for both the pastor and the assistant and set up boundaries for herself to prevent anything like that from ever happening again. She added, “this silence about the disrespect from male colleagues leaves Black women more critical of us and that could stem a lot of different systemic ideals about sexuality and women’s place and all those things.” As this discussion ended, the group collectively agreed that establishing and maintaining boundaries is especially important as Black Female Clergy and encouraged us all to do so if we had not already.

Along my journey, I was taken with the sheer beauty of the women I met and spoke with about their religious experiences. As we spoke, I could hear the poetry of their experience bubbling forth during our conversations. During and after our conversations, I had numerous moments of revelation. The women in the study nurtured and released my imagination.<sup>8</sup>

I was overjoyed with the sacred moment I shared with this community of Black Female Clergy. I saw these women show up intentionally and authentically in ways I could never imagine. I was in awe by their beauty despite their calls being battered, bullied, and/or bruised. I appreciate the colorful ways they shared and how they each were able to leave with new insight. I concluded our interview by asking the group to give a word or two to describe how they were leaving our space. This was a way for me to quickly assess the needs of the group and find out

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

ways I could help should the situation require it. Everyone had a different response to this question. The initial response was a feeling refreshed because it was good to know that they were not alone with what they had been feeling about their ministry and the contexts and people they served. Another participant shared she was relieved and sad at the same time. On the one hand she felt refreshed from the interview, but she was simultaneously saddened that most of the group's responses and experiences were so similar. She said she could only imagine the responses from a larger group of Black Female Clergy. One participant noted feeling grieved and went on to share how she has learned in her community of pulpits being vacated for varied reasons and learning how Protestant Black churches were still closed to the idea of inviting Black Female Clergy to consider applying for the position. She notes this is disheartening especially with the increasing number of Black Female Clergy well equipped and qualified seeking a church to pastor. "The idea of a woman and creating space, and not creating boundaries for them to be acclimated in those spaces, that is insanity and feel we want to know why. Churches are closing and we want to know why."

The last responses were resolved, encouraged, and conflicted. The one who felt encouraged said, "I am sitting here with a group of women who are not afraid to speak up and speak out. Who are up to the challenge of reimagining, women who got it and helping others reimagine God. I did not say easy, I said encouraged" The fruit of her encouragement includes implementing curricula that identifies women in the Bible and highlight their acts every with every opportunity she gets. The participant that felt resolved offered no further commentary. She will, however, remain in the current context and do all she can in whatever position she holds.

And for the participant that felt conflicted, she followed up her response with “How long Lord? We have been going through these issues for years and there is still a fight to be had.

M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, says that one of the roots of mental illness is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves<sup>9</sup>.

As I closed our time with prayer, I knew that we had spent time together speaking the truth of the lies we had once told ourselves; the lies that maybe things will get better if we just keep going and remain silent. The truth of it is the lies and the silence were silently eating away at our soul. We, like Esther, must speak up, not just to save our own lives but the lives of those that follow. Khang noted, “Speaking up, even testing out your voice, requires resilience. It’s not a matter of toughening up, becoming immune, or being unmoved by criticism or failure. It’s a matter of humility.”<sup>10</sup>As we as Black Female Clergy move forward on this path, we are becoming the ancestors to the legacy that is to come.

Following the interview, I received some amazing feedback from the group and future opportunities for me to consider. Overall, the participants were appreciative of the opportunity for us to gather and share some sensitive topics. They especially being able to do so with other Black Female Clergy as it created a common bond and new connection. A portion shared that they would have been willing to share more but held back only because our session was being recorded. This information encouraged to continue creating spaces for other Black Female Clergy and inviting them to “concealed gatherings” that provide pastoral care for pastors that

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>10</sup> Khang, 60.

look like them. I felt affirmed by receiving applause and words of gratitude from the group for creating space to have “transparent, real, and raw conversations.” The greatest compliment for me was that my “work is uncharted territory in the Academy in regard to the silence.” This dispelled some lies I believed surrounding my influence and contributions to academia and churches collectively. This study marks the beginning of my contribution to our (Black Female Clergy) narratives; it represents an inaugural decisive moment and breaking of silence with an amazing group of Black Female Clergy I highly respect and felt fortunate enough to share sacred space with. This project completed with my Black Female Clergy comrades confirmed Khang’s position that “speaking up does not increase division. It brings injustice and sin to the forefront. Speaking up can be an avenue of truth and healing, which can be painful for you and your friends.”<sup>11</sup>

### **CHANGES TO PROTOCOL**

The first change that occurred to the original protocol was the length of time allotted for the interview. I originally planned a three-hour session with the women and offered each participant a \$25.00 DoorDash food credit. As the planned date for the interview approached, I began to receive cancellations from over half of the participants who previously confirmed their attendance. When I researched further to see if there was an issue with the date and if the problem could be resolved with that, I learned that it was the time commitment that negatively impacted their decision and not the date itself. Once I reduced the interview time to ninety (90) minutes, I received confirmation from my original group of participants. In hindsight, as a Black

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<sup>11</sup> Khang, 67.

Female Clergy, single parent, and career professional, I struggle with agreeing to events with extended schedule times even with food involved. It is hard to manage day-to-day tasks with one day off (Saturday) with a teenage daughter and a spoiled pet. Looking ahead to future peer group meetings and sessions, I must be mindful of both the day of the week and the time allotted. I must also consider dedicated events and holidays that may further decrease the likelihood of attendance.

I would still consider the group interview a successful one because I received 100% attendance and participation at various points of the interview. I also want to note that even with cutting the interview time in half our group still managed to go over an additional thirty minutes. A learning I received from this is to remain flexible – with meeting with Black Female Clergy. The women came even with packed schedules and enjoyed themselves so much that they stayed longer than they planned.

My second unplanned change was a result of the first. I knew that I would not be able to ask all ten questions in a 90-minute timeframe with six Black Female Clergy who have been come great concealers of silence. I considered two options to address this issue 1. Try to schedule another session 2. Contact the group individually to get their responses to my unanswered questions. After reviewing the data, I collected from our initial interview I decided against both. The group interview was successful I believe because it was authentic, and the participants flowed off one another's energy. Scheduling another meeting time to answer my remaining questions did not seem beneficial. The discussions about Black Female Clergy call story, silence, and how it impacts our ministry were the heart of my research questions and thesis. The group were more than willing to share their experiences with silence and how they

have considered other career paths, etc. confirmed my thesis about the silence that exists among Black Female Clergy. I also wanted to be mindful of the participants that already disclosed to me that there was some information that was held back due to my study protocol of audio and visual recording. Lastly after reviewing the remaining questions for the interview, I began to wonder if they were geared more to my own firsthand experiences with my congregational context and less about learning more about Black Female Clergy and establishing common ground to build bridges of change on.

### **PROJECT EVALUATION**

As I consider the outcome of my project and the revisions I would make for future interviews or meetings with Black Female Clergy I would implement the following changes to my methodology:

- Schedule 2-3 meetings with the participants. These meetings would be spaced out between 2 -3 weeks apart and would last no longer than ninety (90) minutes. This would give the participants something to look forward to and reflects a consistent structured timeframe. Scheduling too many meetings would create more of a burden for Black Female Clergy who already have tight schedules.
- Create more in-person events at a location that accommodates children. I would also solicit volunteers to help take care of small children during group meetings.

Individually wrapped snacks and beverages would also be provided for the participants and their children. I do not think a lunch provided and a collective virtual eating experience was attractive, but prepackaged snacks may be more appealing.

Having this option for children will also give Black Female Clergy one less thing to

consider and hopefully be allowed to be fully present for at least a portion of the meeting.

- Develop questions catered to accompany the number of meetings in a session and consider routine questions that can be used to check-in with the group from previous sessions. Build on questions unique to the group to help build individual and collective rapport
- Always remind the participants of their voluntary participation and have contingency plans and spaces in place for moments when a participant may be triggered.
- Follow up with each participant between meeting times just to check in regardless of outcome to see how they are doing. This is a quick tool to use that increases retention potential.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

Leave behind the stories  
of your life. Spit out the  
sour taste of unmet expectation.  
Let the stale scent of what-ifs  
waft back into the swamp  
of your useless fears.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest gift from this project for me was to see other women like me sharing the stories of their lives and holding space with me as I shared mine. Some of these had never been shared with anyone prior to the interview. Conducting this session in a virtual format was beneficial because there was no obligation to wear masks. The greater joy and blessing to see these “Queens” spiritually take off their masks to reveal their true feelings about what it is like being in ministry as Black Female Clergy. Overall, this project was successful as it addressed in detail how silence exists with Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black churches. Whether this silence is learned or self-imposed, it exists and has negatively impacted past and present Black Female Clergy. If left unaddressed these effects could diminish future Black Female Clergy called to serve throughout the world waiting witness it. Walker-Barnes wrote, “To find peace, people with self-enclosed identities need to open themselves for one another and give themselves to one another....”<sup>2</sup> and I was relieved to see some of the participants in this study experiencing a form of peace as their reward for authentically being present.

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<sup>1</sup> Weller and Lerner, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, 155.

<sup>2</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 148.

## MINISTRY CONTEXT

“Do the work your soul must have.”

I purposely opened our time together with inspiring words Dr. Cannon’s as a grounding and self-centering exercise to help us respond to every moment of professional indecisiveness. And at the conclusion of our time spent among queens, I knew that it would not be the last. I knew I would commit to a lifelong ministry specifically for this community - Strong Black Women Preachers, Teachers, and Leaders called by God and equipped to do great ministry throughout the world.

I must also acknowledge that along with the overwhelming love and support I felt with the participants, I knew that our time together would come at the price of great pain and suffering at the hands of our very own Black protestant churches. I knew that our solace would have to come after: finding time in our double and sometimes triple booked days, at the end of working strenuous jobs, spending time with our children doing homework, playing taxi, and listening about their day, spending time with spouses and significant others, and if we have found time to practice self-care (hair, nails, and makeup).

Unfortunately, this time and space for Black Female Clergy happens once we have reached our wits end and are about to walk away from all things ‘ministry.’ We tend to speak up after we have put in the application for the job posting that has nothing to do with ministry but pays well. And we will need a lot of time to begin to scratch the surface. I know that our laughter, tears, long pauses, eye rolls, etc. are non-verbal responses to the many ways we received silent treatment from the mothers, deacons, trustees, and other leaders in the church. “Learning to speak up does not necessarily mean primarily using spoken or written words.

We first learn to communicate nonverbally. We have primal needs and desires, and we are wired to let the world know we exist.”<sup>3</sup> I know how necessary it is to spend time talking to one another and sharing what we really want to say and do to them. And with all these factors considered, I accept this invitation. I lovingly wait for them.... and always make room for them.

My sending for the participants was “May you be happy. May you be free of suffering. May you be at peace.”<sup>4</sup> I prayed prayers of gratitude and protection that as they moved forward from that sacred space that it would never be from God’s presence. My final goal for this group was that this glimpse of respite would give them the hope they need to continue fighting the good fight. I was in awe and very appreciative of the positive feedback and requests for more “offline” discussion. I could never thank this inaugural gathering of Queens enough for their physical presence and their willingness to be authentically present with me. Admittedly I laughed, cried, and pondered in my heart what life would look like from that moment forward. It was both a blessing and honor to stare into a screen of faces that looking back at me; and they looked like me – Black Female Clergy.

### CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT

....I was tired today – because it was another time and another meeting where indeed it just seemed that being female, and clergy is always needing to be the one to call or question the sexism, racism, whatever ism and always feeling like an interloper at the table. I was tired today I was tired today of a struggle that never seems to end, of feeling the weight of being Black

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<sup>3</sup> Kang, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Weller and Lerner, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, 156.

and female  
and clergy.  
I was tired today and wondering why do I keep  
doing this, this cycle that never seems to end.  
Yes, I was tired, real tired today<sup>5</sup>

I realized I was tired that day I received a disturbing phone call weeks prior to conducting my research project. During that conversation, I experienced silence in a new way - “replacement.” I was told that everyone in the congregation I was born into and grew up in no longer wanted to hear my voice. The voices that were available to serve while I took a break were all male with less formal education than me. I knew this was an exaggeration and that not everyone in the church felt that way. I felt a wave of anger wash over me as I was receiving the news in a passive aggressive way, but I was supernaturally prepared that this was getting ready to happen. Never did I think that an abrupt departure would be my answer to longstanding prayers and a part of my near future or that my narrative could be potentially silenced.

The fears that lead a woman to hide her authentic self both arouse anger, and at the same time, require its repression. A woman quiets her anger not only because she thinks it will call reprisals or drive away the love and closeness she seeks, but because anger potentially brings a clarity of vision and a requirement to act that threaten the established order of her life.<sup>6</sup>

After a moment of silent tears, I took the leap of faith and broke my silence on the wayward way I had been treated for years. I did not want to give into the anger and sadness felt during this moment of attack. I refused to let it diminish my character or call even though I knew it was about to change my life from that moment on. My response to this unwarranted invitation to a

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<sup>5</sup> Rev Marsha Brown Woodard DMIN, *I Was Tired Today* (Dallas, TX: brown bridges, 2011), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Crowley Jack, 140.

break was “yes” I accepted this opportunity with my conditions. I clearly communicated on the phone that this break would be complete, not only would I no longer preach on Sundays, but I would also resign from my administrative tasks and roles traditionally occupied by women in the church effective immediately. I explained that I would no longer remain silent and serve in leadership for a church that decided to reduce my call to a level most comfortable for men in authority. And lastly, I shared that my departure would not be silenced, that I would be truthful with my reasons for leaving in a manner that did not needlessly expose others. I was not interested in creating a division in the church, I was intent on my narrative being made known. This experience has made me more determined to advocate spaces for Black Female Clergy to release their troubles and be renewed from a source that fully understands the crosses we bear. The first time I shared my experience with anyone outside of my family was during the interview. It was liberating, encouraging, and affirming for me to be transparent with my “sisters” in the study. My truth telling allowed me to remain open to create future spaces not only for current Black Female Clergy serving in the battlefields of protestant Black churches but also for those getting prepared for the war in seminary, etc.

..... And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin, and in their house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus’ firsthand account of people limiting the fullness of God was displayed when they only saw him as son of a carpenter. Some of the members of my congregation only viewed me as a

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<sup>7</sup> Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version : With the Apocrypha : An Ecumenical Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Mark 6:3-6 NRSV.

little girl whom they helped raise. I subsequently moved beyond the boundaries I once called home to accept invitations to preach in congregations outside of Davidson County that bear witness to my calling and gift. I continue to nurture operate in my pastoral authority and God given gifts and talents daily as a Chaplain. My patients on my census and their families have become my congregation and I minister to them in ways that I desire to be ministered to. I know that I am destined to become a pastor and that in order to be a successful pastor, I must be willing to give myself away in the relationship with my congregation, so that I can be known as much as I know and be transformed while I am transforming others.<sup>8</sup>

### COVENANT CONNECTIONS

Or to put it more pointedly, how can the church transition from an institution that further burdens StrongBlackWomen to a safe space where they can be liberated from the yoke of the ideology and freed for authentic selfhood?<sup>9</sup>

#### Church Collaborations

As we were wrapping up the group “Kandake” presented me with two follow up questions that I was not prepared to address. 1. “Was I ready and willing to report these findings with other protestant churches at conferences, etc.?” and 2. “Now what?” What am I going to do to meet the need for Black Female Clergy grappling in silence and with silence as they try to pursue their call? Both were big and necessary questions I had to ask myself. Honestly, I had not thought much past concluding this project and presenting the findings with my former congregation should they be willing to listen. I had never considered that these Black Female Clergy would

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<sup>8</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 164.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

become invested in my “heart’s desire” and advocate for platforms and spaces for me to break silence in other churches and/or reach out to other Black Female Clergy and let them know there is space for them should they need it. After much thought and prayer, I have decided that this work did not end with that meeting and will not die at the conclusion of this thesis. I desire to create content to share with churches how they can better care for and be in relationship with this powerful resource. In the immediate future I plan to connect with churches to see if they are willing to host support for sacred gatherings much like my project for Black Female Clergy and WomanistCare for StrongBlackWomen in their congregations in need.

Marsha Foster Boyd defines “WomanistCare” as the intentional process of care giving and care receiving by African American women. It is the African American woman finding her place and her voice in this world. It is the bold expression of that woman caring circle.... [I]n this process, the focus is on holistic care of the body, mind and spirit in order that healing and transforming occur for African American women and their circles of influence.”<sup>10</sup> WomanistCare involves a confrontation between and among African American women and, as a result of those confrontations, a confrontation of structures and the strictures in our world. The purpose of confrontation in which African American women are called to engage is bridge building, so that those who come behind us will not have to go through what we have to go through. The coming generation is to stand on our shoulders.<sup>11</sup>

Having been a StrongBlackWoman all my adult life, I am appreciative of the thoughtful caring process for other StrongBlackWomen. I am dedicated to causes and opportunities that invite, encourage, nurture, and foster Black women healing and successfully building bridges with other Black women. I am open to the many ways these opportunities will manifest and am excited about the ways I too will grow while helping others through their growing pains.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 194.

## **SistahCircles**

The choosing of wellness which for us requires the choosing of resilience, is the choosing to fight back, to resist oppression of all kinds, and to reshape teaching and learning for something other than the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

Following my conversation with “Kandake” I was approached by “Nefertiti” with another idea she wanted to share since our interview. Her ministry includes connecting with college students and providing pastoral care at the collegiate level. She knew of the work I did in seminary with the Black Female Clergy at the time (SistahCircle) and suggested a collaboration where we could create a network of support for Black Female Clergy and StrongBlackWomen matriculating through their degree programs. My heart was simultaneously overjoyed and overwhelmed with thoughts of where to begin. Westfield discusses a type of hospitality that physically, spiritually, and emotionally feeds those in our care through a practice called communal logos. Communal logos, she describes “distinguishes the womanist classroom as a place where dialectic-dialogic conversations can happen.” Key features in the Womanist classroom, she states, are “reciprocity, interactivity, and a variety of pedagogical methodology.” The foreseeable work I imagine doing in collaboration with Nefertiti, begins with employing three of her eight practices: active listening, expecting emotions, being responsive, and claiming your own personhood. I am hopeful that in the “stranger-to-stranger hospitality of concealed gathering” we women will “create an enabling power dynamic for resisting, for fighting back, for pressing on”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>. Westfield, *Dear Sisters*.106.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 106.

## My Divine Calling

...most effective pastoral caregivers for StrongBlackWomen may be African-American women who have experienced the burden of the archetype and who have made sufficient progress in their healing journey. In other words, they may be wounded healers who are prepared to “make [their] wounds into a major source of [their] healing power. Using one’s wounds as catalyst for one’s healing ministry to others is the hallmark of personal testimony, one of the most cherished historic practices of African-American Christians.”<sup>14</sup>

Never in my wildest dreams of growing up did I hear or know that I would be living my adult life as a pastoral caregiver. After receiving what I believe was my “call” in 2016 I wrestled with my faith while simultaneously accepting increased leadership opportunities within the church. Khang mentions the two of the various stages of faith as a part of the formal operational stage of Piaget’s framework that resonate most with me and describes them in detail. Stage Three, the Synthetic-Conventional faith, “is when conforming to authority shapes religious identity, and conflicts with personal beliefs are avoided because they may reveal inconsistencies.”<sup>15</sup> Stage Four is also called Individual-Reflective faith and “is a season of struggle and ownership of one’s personal beliefs and feelings.

There is an awareness and openness to the fact that there may be conflicts and inconsistencies.”<sup>16</sup> These showed up during seasons when I questioned “Am I being called to ministry?,” “Why are the women leaving the pulpit?,” “Why am I being called to congregational ministry?,” and “Why are there so many people (especially ones who look like me) against my call to the pulpit?” I continued to wrestle with these questions throughout seminary. I began to

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<sup>14</sup>. Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 166.

<sup>15</sup> Khang, 55.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

receive the answers to some of these questions as a reward for my refusal to let go. My intentions to work through my pain allowed me to be better for my family and not bitter from what I know now to be my divine path.

After seminary I reconnected with the women's ministries I previously walked away from as I was beginning to understand that this was the greatest part of my ministry. My calling to minister to women crossed over into my professional life through my service as a Fetal and Maternal Health Chaplain. This allowed me to re-member and share my lived experiences in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in a way that helped other moms find hope and encouragement during their times of need. Since becoming a Board-Certified Chaplain, I appreciate and would confidently consider implementing Walker-Barnes' "Twelve-Step Recovery Program" into future peer support groups with other Black Female clergy. This program is

...in contrast to traditional counseling, which stresses the importance of therapist affective and cognitive neutrality, the work of pastoral caregivers is firmly rooted within their life experience and their own sense of Christian identity and values. This does not mean, however, that the pastoral caregiver imposes her values upon others; rather, it means that she attempts to facilitate others' experience of growth out of her values.<sup>17</sup>

I am most intricately connected with and would be more prone to begin with step twelve.

Starting at this level affords me opportunity to "carry this message to the StrongBlackWomen" in my life and "embody these principles as an example to them and the generations that follow".<sup>18</sup>

This step speaks most to me with my journey because it:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 194.

- involves sharing my “learning and recovery process with others, commits women in recovery to the education and healing of other StrongBlackWomen” labels “regeneration [which] is the power to pass on wisdom, knowledge, and Black women’s cultural heritage from generation to generation”.<sup>19</sup>
- “seeks to undo-or at the very least, interrupt-the messages that have conscripted generations of African-American women and girls into the legacy of strength.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Benediction**

While I still wait for protestant Black churches to wake up to an era where Black Female Clergy lives and ministry matter too, I remain focused on the many ways I have been called to minister. I continue to place my roles as student, teacher, clergy, and spiritual caregiver before God, my strength and redeemer. I take from this study and back into the world with me a deeper understanding of the “silence” that was sent to kill me (spiritually). And in knowing better, I choose to “do better” by no longer remaining silent about matters specific to Black Female Clergy and their right to answer their call to ministry (including Protestant Black Churches). I must continue with this work so that individually my fellow Black Female Clergy as well as our collective legacy will not perish; because I know this project has been completed for such times as these.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 195.

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## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**  
**MERCER IRB APPROVAL**

## APPENDIX A – MERCER IRB APPROVAL



Monday, March 21, 2022

Ms. Pamela S Mitchell  
3001 Mercer University Drive  
School of Theology  
Atlanta, GA 31207

**RE: No Longer Remaining Silent: Defining, Addressing, and Exploring Silence Experienced Among Black Female Clergy (H2203070)**

Dear Ms. Mitchell:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 16-Mar-2022 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with the 2018 Federal Regulations [21 CFR 56.110\(b\)](#) and [45 CFR 46.110\(b\)](#) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) \_6, \_7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 21-Mar-2022. The protocol expires on 20-Mar-2023. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee. **Item(s) Approved:**

Student application for Black female clergy research using interviews to learn more about Black Female Clergy experiences in Protestant Black Churches that they tend to remain silent about.

**NOTE:** You **MUST** report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and **ALL** accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our [Satisfaction Survey](#) and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ava Chambliss-Richardson".

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.  
Director of Research Compliance  
Member  
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance  
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: [ORC\\_Mercer@Mercer.Edu](mailto:ORC_Mercer@Mercer.Edu) | Fax: 478-301-2329 1501  
Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001

**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

## APPENDIX B – INFORMED CONSENT FORM



*James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology*

### **No Longer Remaining Silent: Defining, Addressing, and Exploring Silence Experienced Among Black Female Clergy**

#### **Informed Consent**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

#### **Investigators**

Pamela S. Mitchell, MDiv, McAfee School of Theology, Theology  
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 336-926-9076

#### **Purpose of the Research**

This research study is designed to provide seminary Black Female Clergy an opportunity for dialogue specifically related to personal experiences and occurrences of “silence” in Protestant Black Churches and the impact on their decision to pursue vocations in congregational ministry. Topics that may or may not contribute to the “silence” include: microaggression, sexism, inappropriate sexual advances, and behaviors, etc. The data from this research will be used to fulfill necessary requirements to complete Doctor of Ministry thesis. Data may later be used to develop and implement ministry support groups for Black Female Clergy and generate awareness of unspoken actions against Black Female Clergy in Protestant Black Churches.

#### **Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be audio recorded. The interview will include questions about your beliefs about Black Female Clergy in leadership, your ministerial leadership role, current vocation, experiences that provoked or promoted you being silent, and/or situations you remained silent about.

Your participation will take approximately 3 hours.

#### **Potential Risks or Discomforts**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. All participation in this research is voluntary; participants are encouraged to participate to the level they feel comfortable with and may leave at any point during the interview. Assistance will be available for any participants in need during the interview.

#### **Potential Benefits of the Research**

This study will provide Black Female Clergy with a space to share their collective experiences in Protestant Black Churches. This data may “break the silence” (provide possible explanations for) about the gaps of seminary trained Black Female Clergy pursuing a vocation in congregational ministry. Black Female Clergy may also benefit from spiritual support and pastoral care from Principal Investigator.

**Confidentiality and Data Storage**

The information that you provide is personal and confidential. During the interview, the Principal Investigator Pamela Mitchell will refrain from using your name. The audio recording of your interview will be heard only by the Principal Investigator. It will be stored in an encrypted electronic folder that is accessible only by the Principal Investigator Pamela Mitchell. Any identifying information for yourself or other people will be omitted from the transcript. The only research materials with your name will be the consent form, which will be stored in a locked file cabinet in an area secured by Pamela Mitchell and accessible only by Pamela Mitchell. Audio recordings will be stored for 3 years after completion of the study, when they will be destroyed.

**Participation and Withdrawal**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Pamela Mitchell at 336-926-9076 or pamelasmitchell@icloud.com.

**Questions about the Research**

If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Pamela Mitchell at 336-926-9076 or pamelasmitchell@icloud.com.

**Audio or Video Taping**

By participating in this study, you agree that your interview can be audio recorded.

**Reasons for Exclusion from this Study**

This primary goal for this research is to create dialogue for Black Female Clergy regarding their personal experiences as leaders in Protestant Black Churches. For this reason, you may not participate in this study if you are not a seminary trained Black Female Clergy who has served (or currently serving) in a ministerial leadership capacity.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Research Participant Name (Print)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Research Participant Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Person Obtaining Consent Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**APPENDIX C**  
**RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

## APPENDIX C – RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [Name]:

My name is Pamela Mitchell, and I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Mercer University McAfee School of Theology. You have received this email to inform you about a research study you may be interested in participating in. I am facilitating a peer group discussion about the experiences of seminary trained Black Female Clergy with leadership roles in Black Protestant churches. Participation in this study will take approximately three (3) hours. Participants are eligible to receive a \$25 Door Dash credit towards lunch the day of the study.

There are no known risks involved in this research and I want to emphasize that taking part in this study is completely voluntary. Your responses will be confidently maintained and only shared between myself as the Principal Investigator and my research committee members.

Should you decide to take part in this study, you will receive more information in a separate email. If you are interested or have any questions, please contact Pamela Mitchell at [pamelasmitchell@icloud.com](mailto:pamelasmitchell@icloud.com) or 336-926-9076.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Pamela Mitchell, MDiv

**APPENDIX D**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Black Female Clergy Interview Questions

1. Share your thoughts about Black Female Clergy serving in a senior leadership capacity (i.e.: Senior Pastor)?
2. Share your Black Female Clergy call to ministry experience.
3. How closely aligned are you with your call in your current vocation?  
Possible Follow up Question
  - a. What factors possibly hinder your call if not closely aligned?
4. How confident are you in your pastoral authority as Black Female Clergy?
5. How supported do you feel in your congregational leadership role by your Pastor, colleagues, and congregation?
6. Share your thoughts about sexism and inappropriate sexual comments and/or advances related to Black Female Clergy in Black Protestant Churches in the Southeast.
7. Share any personal experience(s) of the beforementioned acts as Black Female Clergy.
8. As a Black Female Clergy, describe a time that you felt “silenced” by someone (or group) in a situation and/or a time that you remained silent about the situation.  
Possible Follow-up Questions
  - a. How do you feel hearing your experience allowed and/or sharing it with Black Female Clergy today?
  - b. To others, how does hearing that resonate with you as Black Female Clergy?
  - c. Have these experiences impacted your capacity to serve and/or actively participate in your congregation?
9. What other factor(s) do you believe prevent you as a Black Female Clergy or any other Black Female Clergy from pursuing full-time senior leadership positions in your congregation?
10. How likely would you be to recommend your congregation to another Black Female Clergy seeking a leadership role?