ARTICLES

Black Mega-Churches in the Internet Age: Exploring Theological Teachings and Social Outreach Efforts

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Abstract The research on Black mega-churches has been limited at best. To date, little is known about theological teachings of Black mega-churches. Other primary characteristics of Black mega-churches are even less understood, e.g., how these institutions promote their theological teachings online. Consequently, in this study, Black mega-church websites constitute a data source for examining links between theological teachings and community needs. Specifically, this qualitative study of Internet-mediated research examines the websites of 12 Black mega-churches via content analyses of sermons and information regarding various outreach programs found on their web pages. Results indicate four broad theological themes: honoring the Holy Spirit, heavenly minded, Biblical principles, and social legacy. The findings reveal that these themes were related to the social outreach efforts of the 12 Black mega-churches. Research implications for future studies of Black mega-churches are discussed.

Keywords African Americans · Mega-churches · Theology · Social outreach efforts

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Understood via their historical role, Black churches have emerged and matured from the "invisible institution" to its current dynamism within communities across the USA. That is to say, both historically and currently, Black churches have assumed diverse responsibilities beyond spreading the Gospel to save souls. While the function of Black churches provides some clues about this religious institution, those clues also reveal that Black churches provided more than traditional religious instruction. Consequently, a fundamental understanding of the functions of Black churches requires some knowledge about how race, racism, and racial discrimination have impacted the spiritual needs of African American people. Therefore, some social scientists often study Black churches to explain the achievements, cultures, and politics among African Americans (Billingsley 1999; June 2008; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; West and Glaude 2003). For example, Black churches have had to help their members overcome societal barriers by providing educational and employment opportunities (Billingsley and Caldwell 1994; Billingsley and Morrison-Rodriguez 2007; Kunjufu 1994; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990), maintaining support networks (Brown and Gary 1991; Chatters et al. 2002; Krause 2010; Mattis et al. 2007), engaging in political participation (Brown 2006; Brown and Brown 2003; Harris-Lacewell 2007; Reese et al. 2007), and increasing psychosocial well-being (Ellison 1997; McAdoo 1995; Taylor et al. 2004). Such diverse functions distinguish Black churches as a metaphor of African American life itself.

However, despite the ubiquitous resourcefulness of Black churches concerning African American life, neither Black churches nor African Americans have remained static across time or place. Black churches, like African Americans, do not constitute a monolith (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Taylor 2002). The emergence, growth, and influence of Black mega-churches entail one of the most significant developments regarding how Black churches have responded to changes over time in African American communities. Therefore, the primary purpose of the present study is to examine diverse theological teachings among a purposeful sample of Black mega-churches. Such an examination seems particularly salient, given the increased number of these types of churches over the past three decades. Concomitantly, this study also substantiates associations between theological teachings and social outreach efforts. By establishing those connections, this qualitative investigation essentially sketches variations of Black theological teachings in relation to ministerial programs of Black mega-churches; by focusing on the social outreach efforts evidenced by those ministries, this study examines first-order and second-order social change as one way to document how Black mega-churches engage their congregations in activism.

The Emergence of Black Mega-Churches and Their Presence in the Online Community

Beginning in the 1970s, some Black congregants abandoned smaller, more intimate, family-oriented, neighborhood churches to attend mega-churches. Primary characteristics of mega-churches include the following: (1) 2,000 or more people who attend the church on a weekly basis (Goh 2008; Priest et al. 2010; Warf and Winsberg 2010); (2) lively, exuberant worship services including specific instrumentation, i.e.,

electronic instruments and drums (Goh 2008; Hall-Russell 2005); (3) two or more Sunday worship services; and (4) integration of technology such as a church website, texting, digital multimedia, and blogging (Elligson 2009; June 2008; Patterson 2007; Pinn 2002; Smith 2006; Warf and Winsberg 2010). Towards the goal of increasing church attendance and reaching larger and larger audiences, pastors of Black mega-churches purposefully have invested in online outreach to bring the Gospel message to individuals beyond the confines of local geography. These churches have utilized digital resources such as websites, texting, and blogging to reach individuals beyond the physical locations of their congregations (Elligson 2009; June 2008; Pinn 2002; Warf and Winsberg 2010). Furthermore, the Christian commitment to evangelist outreach has been impacted by the 24-hour, immediate access of the Internet. In particular, Lee (2005 as cited in Hinton 2007) contends that the use of the Internet in the propagation of the Christian faith is a "drive to produce spiritual commodities for mass consumption in an ever-expanding market (p. 5)." Simply stated, Black mega-churches have been able to use their websites to offer all the benefits from their conventional atmosphere of religious worship and spiritual enlightenment to the rest of the world because of "the flexibility, sophistication, and ingenuity" of twenty-first century online technology (Hinton 2007). As a result, the visibility of mega-churches online can disconnect individuals from their worship experience so that they can resume their participation at will while those persons attending in live time are more restricted by etiquette, rules, and protocol (Patterson 2007). With the convenience and control of being a part of a virtual, churchgoing community, people seeking religious experiences via Black mega-church websites have access to the same information, services, entertainment, products, and theological teachings.

Doctrinal Differences Among Black Mega-Churches

To date, little is known about doctrinal diversity as communicated online by pastors of Black mega-churches. Consequently, in this study, the content of Black mega-church websites constitute a qualitative data source for examining links between theological teachings and community needs as identified by online, Black mega-churches. The theological teachings of Black mega-churches comprise guiding principles or foundations regarding the religious behaviors of individuals who practice their faith. Theological teachings of Black mega-churches differ, however. According to several theologians and scholars (Andrews 2002; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Singleton 2002; West and Glaude 2003), Black churches reflect various interpretations of the Christian faith. These studies reveal two broad categories of theological teachings among African American Christians: (1) other-worldliness and (2) this-worldliness. Other-worldliness theology imparts a "race-less" spiritual orientation, emphasizing preparation to enter heaven with minimal attention to liberating African American communities from social injustices (Lincoln 1999). On the contrary, this-worldliness theology stresses the importance of focusing on the here and now, especially individual engagement in societal challenges that impact African American communities (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). New research as well as emergent studies of doctrinal differences in Black churches has to contend with how the twenty-first century online community complicates the integrity of this

traditional theological continuum. Hinton (2007) asserts that the twenty-first century, soul-winning mission of the new, Black church reveals its "genius" in its use of the Internet. Therefore, the distinctions in Black mega-churches theological teachings can be explored from Pentecostalism to Prosperity Gospel to Black Theology by observing real-time sermons via access to the Internet.

Pentecostalism: The Complex Tension Between Other-Worldliness and This-Worldliness

Pentecostalism among Black people emerged from the religious experiences of Reverend William Seymour and Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ. Pentecostalism within Black churches incorporates worship experiences that characteristically include passionate preaching, inspirational music, and manifestations of the Holy Spirit such as clapping, dancing, speaking in tongues, and so forth (Pinn 2002). Lively, spirited worship is a well-known hallmark of most Pentecostal churches. This type of worship experience is also emblematic of many Black mega-churches. Hence, this aspect of Pentecostalism has influenced both traditional Black churches and the evolution of the widely popular non-denominational mega-churches (Gilkes 1998; Smith 2006).

Previous research studies have oversimplified Black Pentecostalism as an entirely other-worldly theology that overlooks the influences of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, primarily because these faith communities were understood as extreme or fanatical Christians whose primary efforts were dedicated to their preparations for the afterlife (McRoberts 1999; Turner 2006). Thus, such influences and pressures addressing human conditions on earth in the here-and-now could have some effect in encouraging Pentecostal churches to become involved with social outreach efforts. In notable contrast to the sole focus on spiritual concerns, the governing organization of the Church of God in Christ recently instituted the Urban Initiative, Inc. to strengthen communities. This initiative addresses five areas: education, economic development, crime, family relationships, and financial literacy. Examples of Black mega-churches influenced by Pentecostal doctrine include the Greater Emmanuel Institutional Church of God in Christ in Detroit, Michigan; the Temple of Deliverance Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee; and the West Angeles Church of God in Christ, Los Angeles, California.

Prosperity Gospel: Promoting Worship as Well as Wealth with This-Worldliness

Predating the emergence of Prosperity Gospel, several well-known, twentieth century, Black preachers emphasized the pursuit of material wealth in the here and now rather than waiting for riches in Heaven in their theological teachings. For example, Bishop Daddy Grace, Father Devine, and Reverend Ike were leaders of ministries that highlighted this message of earthly gratification in contrast to traditional teachings of the historic Black denominations (Dallam 2007; Johnson 2010). Their theology now recognized as a Prosperity Gospel also is accredited to Kenneth Hagin Senior, Neo-Pentecostal faith movement, which is also known as Word of Faith. According to Lee (2007), a Prosperity Gospel provides congregants with an energizing, exuberant other-worldly worship plus a this-worldliness message

of wealth and consumerism. The Prosperity Gospel movement among Black mega-churches represents an emerging area of religious research (Elligson 2009; June 2008; Lee 2007; Pinn 2002). Much of this research has revealed that some Black mega-churches stress individual financial empowerment, which is much different from the historical, social gospel movement as exemplified by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and others as an advocate for change (Harris-Lacewell 2007; June 2008; Lee 2007). Research has suggested that in most cases, these Prosperity Gospel mega-churches stymie progressive political involvement (Pinn 2002). In these churches, theological teachings avoid critiques of societal inequalities in education, health care, the judicial system, etc. resulting in a conservative embrace of God's power that applies spiritual prowess to helping believers overcome more personal challenges (e.g., poverty and sickness) and structural barriers such as discrimination (Smith 2006). Prosperity Gospel mega-churches include World Changers Church International in Atlanta, Georgia and The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas.

Black Liberation: This-Worldliness Among African Americans

Some Black mega-churches stress not only the spiritual growth of congregants but also the important roles of faith communities in transforming oppressive systems within the USA. Specifically, Black liberation addresses challenges to transform racially polarized societies. Given this purpose, Black liberation has historical roots in African Americans experiences with racial oppression in the USA (West and Glaude 2003). During times of tumultuous societal transformations, to be more precise, Black liberation contributed to an understanding of Biblical text as a symbolic, prophetic call for the mental, physical, and spiritual liberations of oppressed Black people in the USA (Cone 1997; West and Glaude 2003). Religious scholars contend that embracing a Black liberation is not confined to specific denominations (Hopkins 1998; Turner 2006). Churches with memberships larger than 2,000 that promote Black liberation include Friendship West Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas and Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois.

The Internet and Evangelism: Social Outreach in the Online Community

Lewis and Trulear (2008) contend that African American faith communities, especially larger congregations such as Black mega-churches, are situated to utilize the Internet to reach local congregations and broader consistencies (e.g., government agencies, industries, and nonprofit organizations). The websites of Black mega-churches permit local congregations and others to explore the different types of sponsored ministry social outreach efforts. Pargament and Maton (2000) describe six pathways through which faith communities engage in social outreach efforts. The six pathways include social action, social avoidance, social conservatism, social conversion, social sanctuary, and social service. These scholars contend that each social outreach pathway has implications for how individuals within churches conceptualize societal change.

   Thus, the website descriptions of social outreach efforts convey whether Black mega-churches participate in either first-order change, second-order change, or both.

First-order change refers to strategies to ameliorate social problems by emphasizing how individuals and specific groups effectively traverse and function within social institutions such as educational, governmental, and political (Lewis and Lambert 2006). First-order change also perpetuates existing social structures. Conversely, second-order change implements strategies to transform oppressive social structures by organizing individuals and specific groups to create more equitable, effective social structures or simply new ones.

Four social outreach efforts seem particularly relevant for this study: social conservatism, social service, social conversion, and social action. Social conservatism strives to engage individuals in benevolent institutions that maintain existing societal structures, while remaining silent regarding perpetual, social inequalities. Social service concentrates on assisting underserved individuals or populations across the developmental life span, sponsoring programs in areas such as homelessness, hunger, mentoring, parenting, etc. that support individuals or populations. Next, social conversion focuses on evangelistic missions; thus, local, state, national, and international missions characterize these churches' stance regarding societal challenges. Each of these three social outreach efforts underscores first-order strategies. In contrast, social action refers to churches that seek to transform societal inequalities through their participation in activities such as civil disobedience, community organizing, political involvement, public policy engagement, and organized protest. These outreach efforts strive to transform oppressive systems, which is characteristic of second-order change.

In this study, the influence of the Internet is a major consideration for analyzing Black mega-churches. Based on this electronic medium, this study explores how religious messages influenced by the theological teachings communicated at Black mega-churches transcend local congregations to enter the virtual community via their websites. Even more specifically, three questions focus attention on prospective ways to inform and advance religious literature regarding African American faith communities: (a) what are the theological teachings among Black mega-churches? (b) how are the diverse theological teachings among Black mega-churches linked to their social outreach efforts? and, (c) how do the diverse theological and social outreach efforts of Black mega-churches encourage first-order and second-order changes in the virtual community?

Method

The broad discipline and practice of qualitative research (Berg 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Schwandt 2007) permits the investigation of the online content and theological teachings of Black mega-churches. The traditional understanding of qualitative inquiry is that of the anthropologist, sociologist, or evaluator participating in the natural setting of a phenomenon under investigation. That is to say, researchers went into real-world settings and provided first-hand accounts of events unfolding naturally (Patton 2002). The rapid evolution of electronic information and communication technologies has significantly expanded opportunities for qualitative researchers to serve as eyewitnesses to whatever surfaces in an online environment. In a groundbreaking handbook of emergent methods (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008),

one third of the volume is devoted to exploring how emergent technologies are impacting qualitative research. Thus, Internet qualitative research is becoming more prevalent, especially given how individuals, groups, and organizations are using technology as a communications and delivery tool. Black mega-churches have capitalized on technological advances in this digital age and thus serve as a fertile ground for an online investigation of their theological teachings and social outreach efforts.

Black Mega-Church Sample Accessible 24 h/day, the researchers used an Internet-based Christian broadcasting portal, StreamingFaith.com, to identify Black mega-churches with a significant online presence. A directory search of all ministries yielded 355 religious broadcasts. These religious broadcasts were from churches, radio, and television programming. From the directory search, a total of 189 African American churches provided online broadcasts of entire worship services. Drawing upon the criteria for what constitutes a mega-church (Elligson 2009; Goh 2008; June 2008; Priest et al. 2010; Warf and Winsberg 2010) and the continuum of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) from other-worldliness to this-worldliness, the senior researcher, along with another member of the research team, identified and selected 12 Black mega-churches. The research team purposely selected 12 exemplary Black mega-churches from the online portal. Purposeful sampling permits researchers to make quality selections based on their prior knowledge and expertise about the population (Berg 2007). Thus, Black churches in the sample had to meet the requirements of a mega-church, which were the following: (1) 2,000 or more people who attend the church on a weekly basis; (2) lively, exuberant worship services including specific instrumentation, i.e., electronic instruments and drums; (3) two or more Sunday worship services; and (4) integration of technology such as a church website, texting, digital multimedia, and blogging.

To ensure the anonymity of the purposeful sample, a pseudonym was given to each church using the names of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Table 1 presents the demographics of the Black mega-churches constituting this study. Using Lincoln and Mamiya's denomination descriptions (1990), six Black mega-churches in this sample represented denominations comprising the Historic Black Church Denominations (HBCD) such as African Methodist Episcopal Church, Church of God in Christ, the Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. The remaining churches include predominantly African American congregations (*n*=4) at Non-denominational Churches, and African American congregants who attend Predominately White Churches (PWC; *n*=2). The PWC churches represent the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Methodist Church.

Procedure For all Black mega-churches selected in the sample, two primary data collection methods were utilized: (1) extensive online observations of worship services with aligning field notes and (2) archival data review of content on websites. Observations, a major source of qualitative data, entail watching and listening to what is transpiring in any given setting (Berg 2007; Patton 2002). A qualitative researcher can be a participant or a nonparticipant in a face-to-face or online setting. Given the online conduct of this study, research team members

Table 1 Description of mega-churches

Church name[a]	Affiliation	Membership size	Region	Number of ministries
Asher	HBCD	12,000	Southwest	45
Benjamin	ND	6,000	Southwest	13
Dan	HBCD	2,000	South	12
Gad	HBCD	6,000	Mid-Atlantic	20
Issachar	ND	2,000	South	17
Joseph	HBCD	25,000	South	40
Judah	HBCD	10,000	Mid-Atlantic	35
Levi	ND	6,000	Midwest	18
Naphtali	PWD	8,500	Midwest	41
Reuben	ND	5,000	South	71
Simeon	PWD	6,500	Midwest	130
Zebulun	HBCD	6,000	Midwest	250

[a] A pseudonym was used to protect the anonymity of the participating churches

engaged in nonparticipant observations in order to understand the complexity of theological teachings in Black mega-churches. Overall, members of the research team engaged in more than 150 contact hours of online observations of Black mega-church worship services and took aligning field notes. For each church, two sermons were audio-taped and transcribed. To ensure adequate training for transcribing sermons, the research team participated in a workshop regarding transcription and verification of qualitative data.

Archival documents were the second primary source of qualitative data utilized in this study. Patton (2002) defines documents to include "written materials and other documents from organizational, clinical, or program records; memoranda and correspondence; official publications and reports (p. 4)" and so forth. Social scientists have long drawn upon public records to define and explore social phenomena. Hence, Black mega-churches maintain rich and robust websites as a running archival record of their vision, mission, ministries, activities, announcements, and so on, which were helpful in understanding theological teachings and social outreach efforts.

Data Analysis To identify codes, categories, and themes, content analysis was used in this study (Berg 2007; Patton 2002). First, the online observational data of the worship services and sermon transcriptions were transcribed and assessed. Two members of the research team listened to the sermons, read, and reread the transcripts. Team members proceeded to code the sermons in order to inductively identify emergent themes. The two researchers individually identified codes and developed code definitions. These researchers developed their codes and themes privately prior to each research meeting. The two researchers initially coded, discussed, and evaluated the sermon data, after which they read through the transcribed sermons making slight modifications to the codes and code definitions. This iterative coding process continued until researchers created themes and established consensus regarding inter-rater reliability.

Each website for the 12 Black mega-churches was coded on its motto and description of ministries. Each motto was coded to determine the extent to which it addressed individual, community, or societal factors. Individual factors referred to statements related to personal salvation, personal relationship with God, and embodying characteristics of God. Community factors addressed improving conditions in the local community and creating a positive sense of community among congregants and their surrounding community. Societal factors addressed macro level concerns focusing on evangelism and stewardship in the USA and other countries. The ministries listed on each church's website were coded using the social outreach efforts descriptions of Pargament and Maton (2000). Those social outreach efforts descriptions included: social action, social service, social conservatism, and social conversion.

Results

Overall, the results of this study are organized around three questions. For the primary research question, the sermon content analysis yielded the following themes: biblical principles, honoring the Holy Spirit, heavenly minded, and social legacy. For the second research question, the research explored potential links between diverse theological teachings and social outreach efforts among Black mega-churches. The third and final question, regarding first-order and second-order change, revealed social conversion and social services as the most prevalent outreach efforts among Black mega-churches. A description of each theme is presented below.

Biblical Principles

The theme of biblical principles underscores the significance of spiritual maturation as an individual develops his/her personal relationship with God. Two types of relationships (i.e., an individual's relationship with God and parents' personal accountability for their children) yielded to be the most salient dimensions within the biblical principles theme. Such spiritual maturation, whether evidenced at the personal level or in parenting practices, requires congregants to make positive lifestyle choices that are consistent with biblical teachings. All of the sermon content at the Black mega-churches in this study included biblical principles. A sermon from the Reuben Church illustrated the Biblical principles theme in the following excerpt:

> Commitment is not popular these days. No one wants to be obligated to anything or anyone. We prefer to be fun, foot loose, and fancy free. So we do common law instead of covenant relationships to keep our options open in case we see something else we want. We do that with everything, our job, our careers, church, and even our relationship with Christ. We hang out with him until we see something better we want. Whole hearted commitment is what pleases God. Some whole hearted commitment is about love. Jesus said in Matthew 22:37, it is loving God with all one's heart and soul and mind, and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. When you love God whole heartily, you don't hold back.

The theme of biblical principles, in advocating an intimate relationship with God, also requires some reflection and assessment of an individual's personal journeys in his/her encounters with the Divine. Sermons that advocate biblical principles let congregations know that "getting right with God" is very important by emphasizing the fact that, in any meaningful relationship, only commitment will provide the wherewithal to overcome negative encounters. A sermon from the Issachar Church illustrated this thematic understanding about how committed God is to those who believe.

> We don't teach people how to deal with the mess ups in life because we, we try to hold on to this thing that the church is perfect or sinlessly perfect and that nothing ever happens and the only reason other folk look good when *you* [emphasis added] mess up is not because they haven't messed up but because they haven't been exposed or caught. And so, we [then] lose a lot of people [from the church because] when they mess up,… they have a hard time walking back in church; [and] so, they [then] try to find another church where nobody knows them or they won't go [at all], or if they messed up actually [with]in church then they won't go to church at all because [of] the guilt and [feeling] overwhelm[ed] [by] everything [where] the mess up [has] take[n] place. But understand something, even though the church doesn't begin to teach you how to fall and get back up again [after you] mess up, believe me that God teaches you.

Parental accountability for their children also added another dimension to sermons that emphasized the biblical principles theme. Parental accountability refers to parents and other adults becoming more positively engaged in the lives of African American children and youth. Sermon content with parental accountability messages pointed to how previous generations had successfully parented children and youth in regards to how young people needed to navigate societal challenges. Further, Black mega-churches in this sample emphasized that God expects parents, extended family, and other adults to instill values that align with biblical teachings. Thus, some Black mega-churches purposefully endorse parental accountability as an extension of their theological teachings regarding biblical principles. These mega-churches under-scored differences between effective parenting practices and the misguided attempts of parents who want to befriend their children instead of raising them. A sermon at the Simeon Church illustrated:

> First, my father was the head of his house, and there were certain things that were not allowed or tolerated in the house…The discipline that we receive was an important part in shaping our character and personality, instilling positive core values and influencing a positive outlook on life. It is precisely a lack of discipline and focus today that precipitates much of the social problems that we have…When you have a rule less society, you have chaos and anarchy and you have the making of that society's downfall and ruin. Fathers play a key role in dispensing and modeling discipline. American society and popular culture give license and permission to all types of behavior…My father's house is a metaphor for a place for discipline and stability and security and honor and dignity and respect were taught and handed down. My father's house was a

place where you got some learning like the old folks would say. And you got some training on how to be a decent human being.

Another example of parental accountability is a sermon at the Joseph Church, which emphasized:

> I don't know if you do this, but the success of motherhood, the success of parenting, is that every mamma, every daddy has to talk to God about their children. See Hanna prayed to God, she didn't first go to fertility doctor, she didn't first do this. It says Hanna prayed to God…. I have to ask you how are you training your child? If your kid goes home and watches all kinds of stuff on TV, and has all kinds of stuff on their walls and listening to all kinds of stuff on their iPods and all that, you are [parent(s)] letting them do whatever they want to do and say whatever they want to say, and then [you] bring them here, and want us to fix them in 20 min. Please understand this; if you are not talking to your child about God, then your child won't know who they are. And when your child doesn't know who they are that's a problem. Then they devalue life.

Honoring the Holy Spirit

Honoring the Holy Spirit theme refers to the acknowledgement of God's indwelling within the lives of congregation members. Regardless of the theological orientation, all of the sermons mentioned the significance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. For example, a sermon at the Judah Church explains the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering one to prepare for a special task. This sermon stressed the following:

> You know it, but something makes you do it anyhow because there is always a tug of war inside of us, between our deformed self and our reformed self. But, the Holy Spirit was given to us so that we could be transformed; so, when you receive the Holy Spirit, the struggle between your reformed self and your deformed self is over. Because when the Holy Spirit comes on the inside, it transforms or gives you an entirely new form. And now, for every person that is in the process of being transformed, it is my assignment to tell you, "You're a champion!" And for the last four weeks, everywhere I have gone to preach or teach, I've been teaching the people that God has called you, God has chosen you to be a champion. Touch your neighbor and say,… "[Y]ou're sitting next to a champion."

A sermon delivered at the Issachar Church affirms the importance of the Holy Spirit in a person's religious and spiritual maturation. This sermon illustrated the honoring of Holy Spirit theme in the following excerpt:

> Very, very important that I want to make to each of you to be filled with Holy Spirit is because the doctrine has been attached to this dwelling of the Holy Spirit. All of my life growing up, people had tried to introduce me to drugs, tried to get me to come to the altar, to pray, and I came out of the seventh and evangelist background and put my presence in the power of God was always on my right when other kids were playing with other things, I was taking

cardboard boxes and cutting them up and making them into a pulpit in my room and going behind them and preaching. By having a pulpit, no one was preaching to me. The hand of God was on my life. The Holy Spirit was designated and ascribed to my life so that I could preach this message to you today. When I was a little child, before I went through drugs, before I went through prison, God had his hands on my life and God has his hands on your life, and false doctrines will alienate you from God and have you thinking something false. Bible says bless be the God who has blessed us with all spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ Jesus according to His chosen before the foundation of the world.

Heavenly Minded

The heavenly minded theme teaches congregants to focus on the after-life and the expectations of residing in heaven. Therefore, congregants receive messages that direct their involvement on spiritual development efforts that will benefit them in heaven and neglect searching for solutions to personal or societal challenges. This theme is consistent with the other-worldliness theological orientation. A sermon at the Levi Church illustrated:

This is exactly where [state's name] is right now and unemployment is over 20% highest in the nation. Is there anything good in [state's name] right now? Listening to the media, they're talking about [this industry] and what they're doing to people. This [industry] is not your source. They're just a mean for God to bless you. God is your source. It is He who sustains us in the time of famine. I'll say that again, it is God who sustains us in the time of famine. We don't live by this world system. We don't care if the stock market goes down three or four times. We don't care. Why, God says, I'll always make sure you have more than enough.

Another example of the heavenly minded theme is a sermon delivered at the Dan Church. The sermon underscored:

Have you paid attention to the oil spill in the gulf over yonder? Have you paid attention to floods in diverse places? Have you paid attention to wars and rumors of wars in diverse places? Whenever you hear of these things, I didn't say it. The Bible said it. Child of God, get ready because He's soon to come. I'm scared. Nowadays, we're still so caught up with trying to get a shout on from down here, we've forgotten how to get our shout on to get ready for over yonder. This is what I'm trying to tell you child of God. Don't spend most of your energy and your time just celebrating the stuff of what you can have in this life. Rather you got to get ready to get ready to shout about the life to come.

Social Legacy

Social legacy, as defined by Black theology literature, reveals the historic, prophetic call of Black churches across three historical eras (i.e., chattel slavery, racial

segregation or Jim Crow, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement). The social legacy theme reflects the findings of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) that some African American clergy accentuate African American pride messages in their sermons as one way to underscore the unique functions of Black churches as bulwarks against injustices within US society. Knowledge of African American history and the plights of American Americans signify dimensions of the social legacy theme. For example, a sermon of the Judah Church centered upon:

> We are the last revolutionaries in America. If we fail to leave a legacy of revolution for our children, we have failed our mission and should be dismissed. Those of us that are 40 and over, that remember the Civil Rights struggle, marched, and were part of the [B]lack [P]ower [M]ovement. Marched and remember the March on Washington and the Million Man March. When look where we were in '67, look where we were in '87, and see where we are now. I thank God for the Will Smiths. I thank God he can make 50 million dollars a movie. I thank God for Oprah. I thank God for Barack Obama.

Furthermore, African American theologians and other religious scholars discussed the tendencies of African American Christians to view themselves in the likeness of God. Therefore, some African Americans recognize God and Jesus as the source of not only sanctifying transformation but also a source of liberation that counters oppressive societal structures (Calhoun-Brown 1998; Cone 1997; Mattis and Jagers 2001). Mattis and colleagues (2003) posit that African Americans historically have drawn upon biblical narratives as well as specific figures as metaphors for living and thriving in hostile, social environments like the story about Abraham's life, the trials of Moses, how Jesus Christ transformed various individuals, or Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. These metaphors in some applications of faith are linked to famous figures in African American history such as Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Therefore, Black mega-churches facilitate a social Gospel that builds upon the social justice, which defined the Civil Rights Movement by cementing the personal responsibility to raise children who understand their legacies as both heirs of God and the beneficiaries of African American struggles within US society. The sermon at the Naphtali Church described to the membership the links between African American history and a personal relationship with God. The sermon highlighted:

> See if you don't know your history, you don't know God, and if you know God that means you know your history… You have got to know what the Lord has already done for your ancestors because if you don't know what the Lord has done for your ancestors, you will pop up and say that you did this all by yourself. I pulled myself up by my boot straps, I made it to Harvard and Yale all by myself. I got to Dartmouth all by myself. I got this job all by myself. If you look at my resume, it doesn't say anything about the Civil Rights Movement, it doesn't say anything about Malcolm X; it doesn't say anything about Martin Luther King, I did this resume all by myself. Yes, you probably wrote the resume all by yourself, but if it wasn't for other people, nobody would have read your resume in the first place. If it had not been for your ancestors you got to know in order for you to be where you are right now it is

because somebody else went before you and I don't know if they are sitting right here. Can you give thanks for those who have paved the way so we are where we are right now?

Social legacy also encourages congregants to critically ponder challenges facing African American communities, especially the challenges that Black children must overcome. For example, social legacy sermons at Black mega-churches challenged members to become actively involved in social change efforts within their local communities. This call to direct action is reminiscent of how traditional Black churches in earlier periods of time prepared their members to engage in social justice efforts. For those mega-church preachers who address the racial and structural inequalities experienced by many African American male children and youth, a sermon at the Asher Church, as simply one example of the continuity in social legacy messages explained:

…Here it is they categorize you because they want to control you. And then my brothers and sisters they define you because they want to confine you. That's what it means to be black and male in this country. Institutions are guilty in a real sense in terms of making it hard for a black man. Y'all not feeling this, but if you don't believe institutions participate in this, then Indiana will give you the word. Indiana is not the only state, but they are one state that admits that they governor determine the number of prison cells that they are going to build by the test scores of 3rd and 4th graders in the urban cities of the state of Indiana. I did not say the suburbs, I did not say the rural areas, I said the urban areas. Urban is a code word for Black and Latino. And all I'm trying to say is instead of correcting the educational system that is leaving our kids behind they build more prisons because they believe in investing in incarceration as opposed to education.

The sermon of the Gad Church highlighted the following:

What would happen if our children would see men fighting for them? It is unnerving for me to go through public schools and see that the only man in the building is teaching Gym or the janitor. Are there not any men who will take time to educate our children so that their first encounter with a man is not the police, a lawyer, or a parole officer? If we can just get men in the church to understand that I got a responsibility because someone made an investment in me and if these men would have enough focus and discipline to help the child without trying to holla at the momma then the children would understand that you ain't got to be no pretend uncle, you ain't got to be Mr so and so, but you could just be a brother from the church who is concerned about our children and making a difference. I wish we had some real men in the building who understand that if men are [to] assume their responsibility children would be at a better place.

The second research question explored the link between religious messages and theological teachings among Black mega-churches. The qualitative findings indicate that Black mega-churches vary on the degree to which they represent a particular theological teaching. The findings corroborate prevailing research that Black mega-

churches reflect the diversity of theological teachings (Hopkins 1998). These results also qualitatively document Lincoln and Mamiya's conceptualization of other-worldliness and this-worldliness (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Table 2 presents the four themes in relation to Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel, and Black Liberation Theology. For example, Levi and Zebulun represented Black mega-churches that endorsed other-worldliness theology along with emphasizing teachings of biblical principles and honoring the Holy Spirit. Another significant result of this study suggests that some mega-churches embrace a Black theology orientation such as Asher, Judah, and Naphtali. These mega-churches emphasize God's transformative power to remove not only personal but societal challenges. Thus, African American history provides ample examples of God's power, love, and grace in liberating African Americans from enslavement, segregation, and current inequalities. Therefore, religious teachings in the Bible align with the struggle of African Americans. Similar to Levi and Zebulun, these Black mega-churches underscore biblical principles and honoring the Holy Spirit.

Two mega-churches emphasizing biblical principles and honoring the Holy Spirit represented a Prosperity Gospel theology. At these Black mega-churches, sermon content implied that aspiring to and having wealth were an indication of God's blessing. These financial blessings indicate individuals' faithfulness to rely and trust God in all endeavors (e.g., economic, education, health, and social). Four mega-churches were identified as biblical principles and honoring the Holy Spirit with Pentecostal leanings. These churches embrace an arousing, invigorating worship experience. Among these churches, slight distinctions exist concerning the Black theology. In particular, the sermons at Reuben and Simeon incorporate Black theology messages by highlighting accomplishments as well as interpreting scripture through the lens of the African American experience.

Table 2 Doctrinal teachings and black mega-churches theme

Doctrinal teachings	Black mega-churches theme			
Black theology	Heavenly bound[a]	Biblical principles[b]	Holy spirit[c]	Social legacy[d]
				Asher[b,c]
				Judah[b,c]
				Naphtali[b,c]
Pentecostalism	Dan[b,c]	Issachar[c]		
	Levi[b,c]	Benjamin[c]		
	Zebulun[b,c]	Simeon[c,d]		
		Reuben[c,d]		
Prosperity gospel		Gad[c,d]		
		Joseph[c]		

It is also important to note that the Holy Spirit theme was prevalent in all of the churches

[a] Heavenly bound

[b] Biblical principles

[c] Holy spirit

[d] Social legacy

The third research question investigated the extent to which theological teachings and social outreach efforts are related to first- and second-order change in Black mega-churches. The research team reviewed and qualitatively assessed each mega-church's website. Specifically, we examined the motto to explore the extent to which it addressed individual, community, and societal factors. The results on the Black mega churches' motto revealed 16.7% individual, 25% community, and 58.3% focused on individual to societal factors. Table 3 displays the ecological factors (i.e., individual, community, and societal) and social outreach efforts of the participating Black mega-churches.

The findings indicate social conversion and social service as the most prevalent outreach efforts among this sample of mega-churches. Social conversion outreach programs tend to concentrate on proselytizing individuals to Christianity and to strengthen the relationship with God among congregants. Examples of these

Table 3 Mega-church social outreach efforts and social change

	Affiliation	Motto	Social action	Social service	Social conversion	Social conservatism	Social change
Asher[a,e,f,g]	HBCD	Individual/ societal	X	X	X		1st-order and 2nd-order
Benjamin[b,e,f]	ND	Individual/ societal			X		1st-order
Dan[b,d,e,f]	HBCD	Community			X		1st-order
Gad[c,e,f,g]	HBCD	Individual/ societal		X	X		1st-order
Issachar[b,e,f]	HBCD	Individual			X		1st-order
Joseph[c,e,f]	HBCD	Individual		X	X	X	1st-order
Judah[a,e,f,g]	HBCD	Individual/ community/ societal	X	X	X		1st-order and 2nd-order
Levi[b,d,e,f]	ND	Individual/ community		X	X		1st-order
Naphtali[a,e,f,g]	PWD	Individual/ community/ societal	X	X	X		1st-order and 2nd-order
Reuben[b,e,f]	ND	Community/ societal		X	X		1st-order
Simeon[b,e,f]	PWD	Community	X	X	X		1st-order and 2nd-order
Zebulun[b,d,e,f]	HBCD	Community		X	X		1st-order

[a] Black theology

[b] Pentecostalism

[c] Prosperity gospel

[d] Heavenly bound

[e] Biblical principles

[f] Honoring holy spirit

[g] Social legacy

outreach programs include visiting sick and elderly congregants, visiting incarcerated individuals, participating in domestic and foreign missions, and proselytizing street ministries. Social conversion also encompasses spiritual growth of church attendees through the use of artistic expression through ministries such as choir, dance, and dramatic arts. In addition, social service programs are dedicated to efforts that benefit the underserved and disadvantaged individuals in the local community. Those ministries may include outreach at prisons, homeless shelters, substance abuse centers, domestic violence organizations, and after-school programs. Outreach at these sites conforms to the scriptural injunction to minister to society's most vulnerable members. These outreach efforts are beneficial by providing resources and support to individuals, local organizations, and communities. These ministries primarily concentrate on empowering and collaborating with existing organizations to perpetuate existing social structures.

Only a small number of Black mega-churches participated in social action outreach efforts. These efforts represented encouraging and participating in local, national, and global social issues campaign rallies on topics such as education, civil rights, and human rights. These same churches also participated in letter petitioning campaigns targeting local, state, and national elected officials. Another aspect of these churches' engagements is a ministry centered on addressing societal issues through examining outreach linked to policy. These Black mega-churches engage in outreach efforts attempting to negate oppressive systems not only in the US but also in other countries.

In this sample, only one church participated in social conservatism, and this mega-church primarily focused on two social issues. These social issues were related to definition of marriage and human sexuality. Congregants at this Black mega-church were encouraged to contact their local and state representatives about objecting to either new state or federal laws on these issues. The participation in these outreach efforts embodies first-order social change efforts.

Discussion

The purpose of this study examined the theological teachings and social outreach efforts among Black mega-churches. The four themes identified in the study highlight the similarities and differences among Black mega-churches. All sermons from the Black mega-churches emphasized the need of congregants to have a strong Biblical foundation and an understanding of the Holy Spirit. The need to establish a relationship with God in addition to relying on the Holy Spirit represents foundational teachings in Christianity. Furthermore, such teachings in Black mega-churches, especially how the use of the Internet allows theological teachings to transcend local congregations and to engage in an online presence, suggest a foundational application of theology that bridges the other-worldliness or this-worldliness continuum.

The heavenly minded and social legacy themes represent the differences among the Black mega-churches. These themes illustrate the extreme ends of the conceptualization of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) of other-worldliness and this-worldliness. The heavenly minded theme encompasses other-worldliness, which in

this study provides details about particular Black mega-churches. For instance, Dan, Levi, and Zebulun exemplify Black mega-churches that endorse theological teachings of a conservative theology of some Pentecostal churches. These Black mega-churches participate in primarily social service and social conversion outreach efforts. On the other hand, social legacy theme represents this-worldliness by centering on the transformation of societal norms. Black Liberation Theology underscores this-worldliness continuum. The Black mega-churches of Asher, Judah, and Naphtali emphasize in their theological teachings the significance of African American culture plus social action and social service outreach efforts. From the qualitative assessment of the 12 websites, all of the Black mega-churches identified social service ministries as part of their outreach efforts. Thus, social service outreach represents an integral part of Black mega-churches' outreach efforts.

As highlighted on the Black mega-churches' websites through live sermon broadcasts and descriptions of ministries, the utilization of Internet technology provides congregants and others about outreach efforts at these particular places of worship. The observational and archival data reveal how the use of the Internet by some Black mega-churches depicts these churches engagement in first- and second-order change. For example, if Black Liberation Theology predominates at some Black mega-churches (e.g., Asher, Judah, and Naphtali), then these churches participate in social action outreach efforts focusing on first- and second-order change. Black mega-churches endorsing these theological teaching are consistent with some of the HBCDs' doctrinal understandings to promote issues around inequality and reform oppressive systems. If Pentecostalism is at the center of the theological teachings, then the church's foci are both other-worldliness and this-worldliness. Pentecostal teachings at some Black mega-churches encourage congregants to participate in ministries that primarily focus solely on first-order change (e.g., Issachar and Levi). In this study, the results could not distinguish among Pentecostal Black mega-churches ranging across the doctrinal teachings influencing social outreach efforts. The findings did not corroborate religious scholars' contention about Pentecostal churches engaging in social outreach efforts targeting second-order change. Similarly, if the Prosperity Gospel is at the epicenter of the theological teachings, then the church is also a combination of other-worldliness and this-worldliness wherein the primary messages conveyed rest on the individual's acquisition of wealth (e.g., Gad and Joseph). These Black mega-churches neglect to participate in social justices related to challenges experienced by African Americans. The outreach efforts of these Black mega-churches concentrate on first-order change. Hence, the examination of sermons and ministry descriptions of Black mega-churches via the Internet provides a particular theological orientation that is a foundation for the ministries at these churches.

Another archival data source in this study was the use of published mottos from the Black mega-churches' websites. The qualitative investigation revealed a consistency with the mottos and descriptions of ministries on the websites of the Black mega-churches. The mottos emphasized the need to engage congregants in transforming individuals and the larger society for the greater good of human kind. An inconsistency emerged concerning the examination of the mottos and ministries. In particular, the mottos indicated an outreach mission of evangelism beyond the confines of the church. However, a great deal of the ministries of these Black mega-

churches centered upon ministries at their churches (e.g., choir, dance, Christian education classes, financial workshops, couple retreats, gender-specific retreats, etc.). Thus, the mottos used to convey what Black mega-churches value and espouse are not substantiated in the descriptions of the ministries at these churches. Argyris and Schön (1974) were among the early scholars to identify that there are typically two theories of action involved in institutions espoused theory and theories-in-use. In Black mega-churches, espoused values are often found in official literature and resources such as mottos, mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports, and so forth. Enacted values explain what Black mega-churches have done or currently do in their outreach, and these social outreach efforts are typically supported by how resources are allocated.

Future Research

Research on the Black mega-church is emerging, and there is valued work to be accomplished. It is important that researchers engage in additional studies about this topic. Additional research also needs to be conducted on Black mega-churches to explore the relationship between theological teachings and social outreach efforts. Although this study attempts to begin to explore this relationship, a case study as well as ethnography can potentially provide additional insights regarding the role of theological teachings in shaping social outreach efforts among Black mega-churches. To illustrate, case study research would be ideal in determining the planning and programming of mega-churches that espouse Black theology, given that these churches engage in both first- and second-order change. Further, phenomenological studies can explore the "lived experiences" of pastors as they manage these large congregations. For example, in a cursory gendered review of the leadership roles in Black mega-churches, the role of women needs to be explored. Questions emerge such as: (1) how does being a female pastor influence leadership styles of women who pastor Black mega-churches and (2) does Womanist or Black Feminist Thought predominate in female pastors' theological understandings? In addition, a questionnaire recruiting church leadership including the pastor can also contribute to the small body of research specifically focusing on Black mega-churches. This type of survey research could include items focusing on pastoral characteristics such as educational training, years in the ministries, etc. to organizational characteristics of Black meg-churches including land ownership, membership size, and social outreach efforts. Since this study did not include Black mega-churches from the far western states, more research on regional differences among Black mega-churches are warranted. Lastly, expanded quantitative and qualitative research on the participation and engagement of mega-church members in social action activities and social movements is vital.

Additionally, researchers need to explore Black mega-churches at the individual, community, and societal levels. At the micro-level, research is needed on the motivation of individuals and families of smaller churches to move their membership to mega-churches. The expansive opportunities for networking and professional advancement appear as alluring qualities of Black mega-church (Pinn 2002; Smith 2006). Hence, future studies should investigate the degree to which churchgoers increase their social capital. Furthermore, typologies should be developed to explore

the shifting roles and responsibilities of Black mega-church pastors. For example, recent research points to the danger of celebrity for mega-church pastors (Twitchell 2007). With the sheer number of parishioners at Black mega-churches, studies are needed on the responsiveness of leaders in adjusting to the demands of membership and communities.

At the community level, in traditional mainline denominations, churches must send an apportionment or their earnings to conference and denomination-wide initiatives (e.g., educational systems, missions, and evangelism). Thus, at the community level, quantitative research is needed on the assessment of stewardship and budgets of mega-churches to explore corresponding resource allocation toward social outreach. Community-based participatory action research should be conducted with the mega-church and local communities as equal co-investigators to identify new forms of partnerships that bring a synergy in solving social problems. Theoretical research on how Black mega-churches form a community of practice would be valuable.

To date, little is known about the extent to which societal factors such as education, economics, and politics influence Black mega-churches. Recently, these churches have begun to develop their own K-5 and, in some cases, K-12 schools. A dearth of research exists about how these institutions, if any, are influencing educational policy. From the pulpit, members of mega-churches are often encouraged to participate in a host of campaigns, marches, and rallies; yet, no empirical evidence exists as to the rate and types of participation in which members may engage. Additional studies are needed on how a nonprofit status may facilitate or hinder the extent that the mega-church engages in social outreach. Black mega-churches typically have robust television presence. Additional research is warranted on how the cost of television may hinder outreach opportunities.

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