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And When Does the Black Church Get Political?: Responding in the Era of Trump and Making the Black Church Great Again⁺

JONATHAN C. AUGUSTINE*

Abstract

The November 2018 midterm elections engaged more voters than any midterm election since World War I. Moreover, from a Black Church perspective, the midterm elections arguably engaged more constituent members in secular politics than any time since the Civil Rights Movement and the historic passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. If the axiom is true that, “For every action there is a reaction,” the series of actions that have been part of Donald J. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” narrative have been met with a reaction that is “Making the Black Church Great Again!”

This interdisciplinary Article, juxtaposing aspects of law and

© 2019 by Jonathan C. Augustine: jayaugustine9@gmail.com. The Right Reverend McKinley Young, (former) Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, transitioned from this life on January 16, 2019. He was a career advocate for education and political empowerment to combat racial injustice. In his leadership role as an advocate for Black Church political responsiveness, Bishop Young was one of the speakers at the September 5-6, 2018 opposition rallies in Washington, DC that are detailed in this Article. Shortly thereafter, his health took a significant turn for the worst. It is to Bishop Young and his legacy of politically active ecclesial leadership that this Article is respectfully dedicated.

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theology, as well as history and sociology, asks the focal question, “And When Does the Black Church Get Political?” It uses an interdisciplinary approach to respond around a central thesis that Black Church politicization, as a fight for social justice, is responsive to certain sociopolitical and cultural events. In illustratively drawing a parallel between sociopolitical conditions during the Civil Rights Movement and those during the Era of Trump, this Article uses the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a quasi-case study in arguing the Black Church “gets political” when it responds to the needs of marginalized and oppressed people.

In addition to an extended literature review, this Article engages ethnographic research by using a set of fixed questions addressed to five members of the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in outlining a theology of resistance that is an intricate part of the Black Church experience. In response to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” narrative, I argue the time is now to also “Make the Black Church Great Again!”

I. Introduction

But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven and, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand[,] it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.¹

1. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *STRIDE TOWARD FREEDOM: THE MONTGOMERY STORY* 36 (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2001) (1958).

The November 2018 mid-term elections saw the highest number of voters, in any midterm elections, in more than a century.² Moreover, the midterm elections also brought a resurgence in Black Church political engagement,³ arguably not seen since the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (“the Movement”).⁴ During the Movement, the Black Church responded to repressive sociopolitical conditions that necessitated prophetic action. Similarly, the administration of the United States of America’s forty-fifth president, Donald J. Trump (“Trump”), has also brought about a collective feeling of marginalization by many ethnic minorities, such that Black Church politicization has again become necessary.⁵

2. Ella Nilsen, *The 2018 Midterms had the Highest Turnout Since Before World War I: How Trump Made Political Engagement Great Again*, VOX (Dec. 10, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/12/10/18130492/2018-voter-turnout-political-engagement-trump>.

3. For this Article’s purposes, the expression “Black Church” denotes members and congregations affiliated with the seven independent, historic, and African-American governed denominations founded after the Free African Society of 1787. Specifically, the denominations comprising the Black Church include the: (1) African Methodist Episcopal Church; (2) African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; (3) Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; (4) National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated; (5) National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated; (6) Progressive National Baptist Convention; (7) the Church of God in Christ, and several small denominations not enumerated herein. See Vaughn E. James, *The African-American Church, Political Activity, and Tax Exemption*, 37 SETON HALL L. REV. 371–412 (2007). See also C. ERIC LINCOLN & LAWRENCE H. MAMIYA, *THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* 1 (Duke Univ. Press 7th ed. 1994) (1990).

4. A measure of the Black Church’s success during the Movement is passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. § 1973 (2006). President Lyndon Johnson signed the Act into law on Friday, August 6, 1965. In quantifiably documenting its significance, David Garrow, a noted historian and professor, highlights that in less than one month, more than 60,000 African Americans were added to the voter rolls in just four states, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi. DAVID J. GARROW, *PROTEST AT SELMA: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965* 181–82 (Yale Univ. Press 1978). Further, in noting its significance, Garrow also writes, “the Voting Rights Act was being called ‘the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever enacted’ by [Nicholas Katzenbach] a former attorney general and ‘one of the most important legislative enactments of all time’ by . . . [the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburg, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame and former] chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.” *Id.* at xi.

5. See generally Eugene Scott, *For Many Minorities, ‘Both Sides’ Aren’t to Blame for Worsening Racial Tension*. *Trump Is.*, WASH. POST (July 25, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/07/25/for-many-minorities-both-sides-arent-to-blame-for-worsening-racial-tension-its-trump/?utm_term=.a649d7616fe8 (“multiple race-related topics—from Trump invoking profanity while calling for the firing of National Football League players protesting racism in America to him allegedly calling predominately black developing nations developing nations ‘shithole countries,’—have made headlines that have brought Trump’s leadership into question, particularly in the minds of people of color”).

This Article draws a parallel between “then” and “now,” in a quasi-case study format, by looking at some of the recent political activities of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (“AMEC”), an exemplar for Black Church political organization and infrastructure, in providing a political leadership that is responsive to marginalized people’s needs. Indeed, the results of the 2018 midterm elections unequivocally show that forces galvanized against the Trump Administration’s politics and political rhetoric, with a dramatic shift in the United States Congress.⁶ As this Article details, the AMEC’s operational organization is organically political. It was, therefore, poised to lead Black Church political engagement, working with other ecumenical communions, in reviving a legacy of dissident political resistance.

A. Foundational Understanding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

The AMEC is a sociopolitical, Christocentric, ecclesial body that is also the oldest connectionally operated Black Church in America.⁷ As part of the AMEC’s politically organized operating structure, its executive branch Council of Bishops sets operational and governing policies for individual congregations and pastors, while also appointing the pastors who serve the respective congregations.⁸ Bishops are elected for lifetime service, by a delegate-controlled General Conference that convenes every four years.⁹ Bishops, like all itinerant ministers in the

6. Joel Shannon, *These are the Historic Firsts for Women, Minority, and LGBTQ Candidates in 2018*, USA TODAY (Nov. 6, 2018), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/06/election-results-2018-women-minority-candidates-history-firsts/1912048002/>.

7. See generally T.W. HENDERSON, *THE DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH* iiv-xi (A.M.E. Book Concern 21st ed. 1896). See also LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 51-52.

8. HENDERSON, *supra* note 7, at 164-66, 170-71.

9. *Id.* The first person elected to the AMEC’s bishopric was the Reverend Daniel Corker, a light complexion itinerant preacher from Baltimore’s famous Bethel AME Church. Although Corker became the denomination’s first “elected” bishop in 1816, he withdrew his candidacy and *was not* consecrated. Instead, the AMEC’s first elected *and* consecrated bishop was the Right Reverend Richard Allen, a much darker complexion itinerant preacher from Philadelphia who was founder of the historic Mother Bethel AMEC. See RICHARD S. NEWMAN, *FREEDOM’S PROPHET: BISHOP RICHARD ALLEN, THE AME CHURCH, AND THE BLACK FOUNDING FATHERS* 173-76 (N.Y.U. Press 2008). With Allen serving as the AMEC’s first bishop, all succeeding bishops were elected and consecrated in order of succession and assigned, as part of the itineracy, to their respective Episcopal Districts. For example, the bishop under whom I served, in Louisiana, is the Right Reverend Julius H. McAllister, Sr., the AMEC’s 129th elected and consecrated bishop, who superintends the AMEC’s Eighth Episcopal District, a geography comprising the states of Louisiana and Mississippi. For the

AMEC, have a mandatory retirement age of 73.¹⁰ Successful candidates for the bishopric usually have been pastors, from some of the AMEC's most recognizable pulpits, having been promoted through the AMEC's itineracy.¹¹ As the name implies, the AMEC is a Methodist/Wesleyan-affiliated denomination. The term "Episcopal" denotes its bishop-led, "top-down" system of governance.¹²

In responding to the United States' current sociopolitical climate, specifically since Trump's candidacy and his Administration's governance, the Council of Bishops-led AMEC has been at the forefront of organizing a Black Church social resistance that is deeply engaged in politics. Indeed, on September 5-6, 2018, the Council of Bishops convened its "Call to Consciences" in Washington, DC, hosting a national two-day vigil, social action training, and public protest rally opposite the White House, sending Trump a clear message of resistance.¹³ Further, in leading up to and in the wake of the September 5-6 political events, the Council of Bishops provided local pastors with a schedule of social justice-oriented scriptural periscopes to be used in preaching, as well as worship litanies focused on social justice themes, while directing that, as America approached the November 2018 midterm elections, local pastors lead their congregations in returning to the AMEC's emancipatory origins of liberation and egalitarianism.¹⁴

sake of expediency herein, I shall identify bishops by their number of election, omitting the customary "elected and consecrated" public reference, and highlight their Episcopal District service, when appropriate. Member of the AMEC's Council of Bishops are listed at <https://www.ame-church.com/leadership/bishops-of-the-church/>.

10. Bishops of the Church, THE OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, <https://www.ame-church.com/leadership/bishops-of-the-church> (last visited Oct. 12, 2019).

11. NEWMAN, *supra* note 9.

12. AME CHURCH, <https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-name/>, (last visited Oct. 12, 2019); *see also* LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 54 (discussing the ecclesial power vested in bishops in the AMEC).

13. Harris, *Black Church Sends Message to Trump: Church Leaders Strategize for Midterm Elections at 'Call to Conscience' in D.C.*, ST. LOUIS AM. (Sept. 20, 2018), http://www.stlamerican.com/religion/local_religion/black-church-sends-message-to-trump/article_80781134-bc66-11e8-8bf7-b314e787d6e0.html ("Lafayette Square was filled with prayers, songs of praise and calls for social justice as the bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church hosted a rally across from the White House"). *See generally*, Hamil R. Harris, *Black Church Leaders Send Message to Trump*, WASH. INFORMER, Sept. 13, 2018 ("[p]articipants young and old from across the nation, led by bishops from the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, gathered for the rally . . . and unbridled demands aimed at President Trump who they say must change his ways").

14. The AMEC originates from a 1787 breakaway from the then-Methodist Episcopal Church (the precursor to the United Methodist Church), in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. African American worshipers formed the Free African Society, a precursor to the legal establishment of the AMEC, because they were treated in a discriminatory manner during

Considering the AMEC's recent emphasis on and reentry into secular politics, this Article poses the focal question, "And When Does the Black Church Get Political?" This question presupposes that Black Church political engagement is responsive to certain conditions, necessitating a political participation that is usually framed in the context of resistance. In qualitatively exploring the Black Church's political engagement, I attempt to parallel the conditions necessitating the Black Church's political engagement in the Movement and the perception of similar conditions, again necessitating political engagement, in the era of Trump.

In answering the question, "And When Does the Black Church Get Political?", I survey applicable literature, in the form of books and academic journal articles, while also matching the literature review against ethnographic findings from interviews with subject matter experts, AMEC bishops. Foundationally, this Article is inspired by the late Manning Marble, a noted Columbia University professor, who wrote:

The majority of Black theologians and sociologists of religion tend to make a radical separation between Black faith and the specific political praxis of Black clergy. Most political science research on the Civil Rights Movement concentrates on King's role as a centrist within the broad and often fractious united front that constituted the desegregation campaign, and ignores the historical relationship between Black politics and faith. Few historians have seriously explored the Movement's impact on the evolution of the Black Church.¹⁵

In therefore attempting to pick-up where Marble left off, this Article's thesis is that America's current sociopolitical climate, represented by Trump's "Make America Great Again" narrative, parallels the Movement's climate and again necessitates the Black Church's prophetic response in the form of active political engagement. As several bishops shared during the September 6th "Call to Consciences" protest rally, it's time to "Make the Black Church Great Again!"

worship. See NEWMAN, *supra* note 9, at 173-76; see also HENDERSON, *supra* note 7, at 16. With a liberationist history, the AMEC is the oldest Black-governed denomination, owning the first parcel of property purchased by African-Americans, Mother Bethel AMEC, in downtown Philadelphia. See generally, MOTHER BETHEL, <https://www.motherbethel.org/content.php?cid=18>. (last visited Oct. 12, 2019).

15. MANNING MARBLE, HOW CAPITALISM UNDERDEVELOPED BLACK AMERICA: PROBLEMS IN RACE, POLITICAL THEORY AND SOCIETY 176 (Haymarket Books 2015) (1983).

B. The African Methodist Episcopal Church's Most Recent Political Engagement

The AMEC's most recent political engagement includes express opposition to certain Trump policies and implied support of certain political candidates. Opposition to Trump policies include a nationally organized campaign against the administration's attempts to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, popularly known as either "the ACA" or "Obama Care."¹⁶ Another noted example was the Council of Bishops' public denouncement of the administration's immigration reform policy, separating Mexican children from their families, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions' attempted policy justification in citing portions of Romans 13, the same biblical scripture used to justify the enslavement of African Americans in the antebellum South.¹⁷

Further, because policy and electoral politics often go hand-in-hand, the AMEC's opposition to certain Trump Administration policies has indirectly led to its support of certain political candidates.¹⁸ Most popularly, in leading up to the November 6, 2018 midterm elections, Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum, an active member of the city's Bethel AMEC and Florida's Democratic nominee for governor, benefited from the AMEC's support.¹⁹ Similarly, both Stacey Abrams,

16. Religious News LLC, *African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church Council of Bishops Responds to American Healthcare Act*, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE (Mar. 21, 2017), <https://religionnews.com/2017/03/21/african-methodist-episcopal-ame-church-council-of-bishops-responds-to-american-healthcare-act>.

17. See *AME Church Condemns use of Scripture by Attorney General Sessions to Separate Immigrant Families*, AME CHURCH (June 15, 2018), <https://www.ame-church.com/news/cob-statement-re-condemning-immigrant-family-separation>; see JOHN HOWARD YODER, *THE POLITICS OF JESUS 193-210* (Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 2d ed. 1994) (1972), for an excellent exegetical debunking of the popular norms of compliance, when it comes to civil authorities, as expressed in Romans 13:1-7.

18. In the wake of the December 2017 upset U.S. Senate election in Alabama, a special election to fill the unexpired term of now-U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the Black Church was widely credited for the electoral success of Doug Jones, a former United States attorney who successfully prosecuted the perpetrators responsible for the 1963 deaths of four, African American girls, resulting from an infamous church bombing in Birmingham, AL. Brian Naylor, *'Black Votes Matter': African-Americans Propel Jones to Alabama Win*, NPR (Dec. 13, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/13/570531505/black-votes-matter-african-americans-propel-jones-to-alabama-win>.

19. See generally Quardricos Bernard Driskell, *A Profile of Religion and Politics: Bethel AME of Tallahassee*, CHRISTIAN RECORDER (Nov. 12, 2018), <https://www.thechristianrecorder.com/a-profile-of-religion-and-politicsbethel-ame-of-tallahassee/>.

Georgia's Democratic gubernatorial nominee,²⁰ and Ben Jealous, a former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ("NAACP") and Maryland's 2018 Democratic nominee for governor,²¹ arguably also benefited from the AMEC's organizational support.

C. This Article's Organizational Overview

This Article is an interdisciplinary exploration of political involvement by the Black Church, focusing on social justice. It incorporates aspects of law, sociology, history, and theology. In supporting the forgoing thesis, that contemporary social conditions necessitate the Black Church's prophetic response in the form of political engagement, this Article is structurally organized into eight (8) interconnected parts. Part One provides an introductory overview, presenting the focal question in context and defining this Article's parameters. Part Two builds upon Part One's foundation with a literature review, including both historical and contemporary sources, while also developing a parallel between previous and contemporary social conditions. Part Two is also infused with ethnographic findings, from subject matter experts, several AMEC bishops.

Part Three transitions by detailing the methodology employed as part of this Article's research, before Part Four provides biographical information on the respective bishops who verbally contributed to this Article's composition. Part Five provides a theological reflection on the literature review and ethnographic research before Part Six places them in conversation with contemporary themes. Part Seven progresses by engaging a discussion, based on evidence and social science, before Part Eight concludes this Article with a synthesis of the matters detailed herein.

20. Jenny Jarvie, *In Georgia Gubernatorial Race, Stacey Abrams has a Real Chance to Make History*, L.A. TIMES (Oct. 30, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-georgia-stacey-abrams-20181030-story.html>.

21. Caleb Gayle, *Ben Jealous: Maryland Candidate with an 'Instinctive Muscle' for Activism*, GUARDIAN (Sept. 28, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/28/ben-jealous-maryland-governor-interview>.

II. Literature Review

Since its 1787 genesis and 1816 incorporation, the AMEC has been at the forefront of social justice and resistance politics.²² An example is the well-documented 1822 slave rebellion, led by Denmark Vesey, a founder of the historic Mother Emanuel AMEC in Charleston, South Carolina.²³ Although the AMEC's history includes a host of community "agitators," molded in Jesus's prophetic image,²⁴ this Article's emphasis is more contemporary. Its focus is a comparative analysis of the necessity for the Black Church's political engagement during the Movement and the renewed necessity for the same, in the era of Trump's Make America Great Again narrative.²⁵

22. See generally NEWMAN, *supra* note 9. Moreover, as Lincoln and Mamiya chronicle: "In 1870 an A.M.E. clergyman, Rev. Hiram Revels of Mississippi, became the first black citizen and the first black senator elected to Congress. Also, Rev. Richard H. Crain served four years in the state senate and two years in the House of Representatives; he became a bishop in the A.M.E. Church in 1880. These two clergy politicians at the national level represented only the tip of the iceberg of black clerical involvement in politics." LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 204.

23. See Dennis C. Dickerson, *The Case for a Wesleyan Interpretation of A.M.E. Church History*, in AFRICAN METHODISM AND ITS WESLEYAN HERITAGE: REFLECTIONS ON AME CHURCH HISTORY 8 (2009).

24. John Yoder, a somewhat controversial public theologian, described Jesus as "a social critic and agitator, a drop-out from the social climb, and the spokesman of a counterculture." YODER, *supra* note 17, at 1. In providing an example of Christ-like, politically-resistant leadership (i.e., agitators), the AMEC's list of prophetic ecclesial leaders includes Bishop Henry McNeil Turner. In describing Turner's leadership, Lincoln and Mamiya write:

The most radical political voice in the late nineteenth century was Bishop Henry McNeil Turner of the A.M.E. Church. As an organizer for the Republican party, Turner helped to build a black political base in Georgia. As a theologian he raised a considerable controversy through his black nationalist liberation theology which began with the premise that "God is a Negro." Turner was the singular voice among black clergy that called for reparations for slave labor. He also supported the emigration movement back to Africa.

LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 205. See JAMES H. CONE, GOD OF THE OPPRESSED (Orbis Books 1997) (1975); JAMES H. CONE, A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION (Orbis Books 1990) (1970), for more recent examples of AMEC liberationist theology by James H. Cone, the founder of Black Liberation Theology and a former systematic theology professor at Union Theological Seminary.

25. On October 6, 2018, after arguably the most politically polarizing Supreme Court confirmation process in history, Trump's conservative nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, officially became an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, *Kavanaugh is Sworn in After Close Confirmation Vote in Senate*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 6, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/06/us/politics/brett-kavanaugh-supreme-court.html>. On October 15, 2018, less than two weeks after Kavanaugh assumed office, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College*, an affirmative action case challenging the admissions policies at Harvard University, went to trial. Katie Reilly, *A Lawsuit by Asian-American Students Against Harvard Could End Affirmative Action as We*

A. Recent History as a Foundation: King and Black Church Get Political

There are different theories as to what event launched the Movement. In scholarship written from a legal perspective, I previously argued the Movement emanated from the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).²⁶ In more recent scholarship, however, written from an ecclesial leadership perspective, I argue the December 1955 arrest of Rosa Parks—a very active member of the AMEC in Montgomery, Alabama—followed by the Montgomery Bus Boycott (“the Boycott”) gave rise to the Movement.²⁷ In connecting these perspectives, with the AMEC as a common denominator, Lincoln and Mamiya write:

The case which came to symbolize a decisive break with the past began when Rev. Oliver Leon Brown of the St. Mark's A.M.E. Church in Topeka, Kansas—supported by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund—sued the Board of Education on behalf of his nine-year-old daughter Linda Brown and all other black children similarly injured by segregation in the public schools. The resultant Supreme Court decision granting the relief requested set in motion the civil rights movement which reached its zenith under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., with reverberations around the world. It was Dr. King who led the year-long Montgomery bus boycott, begun in December 1955, and which culminated in a decisive defeat of segregation in the public transportation system of that one-

Know It, TIME (Oct. 16, 2018), <http://time.com/5425147/harvard-affirmative-action-trial-asian-american-students/>. Regardless of the trial's outcome, this case is all but certain to make it to the Supreme Court, where the Court's new 5-4 majority will likely end Affirmative Action. *Id.*

26. See Jonathan C. Augustine, *The Interest Convergence of Education Reform and Economic Development: A Response to “The State of Our Unions,”* 51 UNIV. OF LOUISVILLE L. REV. 407, 407-18 (2013).

27. See Jonathan C. Augustine, *The Fiery Furnace, Civil Disobedience, and the Civil Rights Movement: A Biblical Exegesis on Daniel 3 and Letter From Birmingham Jail*, 21 RICH. PUB. INT. L. REV. 243 (2018). Although I argue the Boycott gave rise to the Movement in 1955, it bears noting that the Boycott was not the first of its kind. The Reverend T.J. Jemison, then-pastor of Mt. Zion First Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, led a similar boycott in 1953 when Blacks boycotted city buses as a means of leveraging economic pressure, demanding an end to Jim Crow segregation in public accommodation. See ADAM FAIRCLOUGH, *TO REDEEM THE SOUL OF AMERICA: THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE & MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 11-12 (Univ. of Ga. Press 1987).

time capital of the Confederacy.²⁸

Regardless, however, of exactly when the Movement began, it is certain the Boycott introduced the world to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (“King”), then-pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (“Dexter Avenue”), as the Movement got underway.

King’s political engagement, as a pastor in the Black Church tradition, was undergirded by a “suffering servant” theology that viewed suffering as redemptive.²⁹ Richard Lischer, a former professor at Duke Divinity School, describes the Boycott in setting the course for the Black Church’s political engagement,³⁰ while chronicling King’s 1954 arrival in Montgomery and installation as pastor of Dexter Avenue, the city’s most distinguished Black congregation.³¹ He notably describes the Boycott’s beginning in December 1955, detailing King’s election as president of the hastily formed Montgomery Improvement Association,³² King’s powerful oration at Holt Street Baptist Church—just over a year after his pastoral installation at Dexter Avenue—and the synthesis of ideas King brought together, as history was set in motion.³³

28. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 211.

29. The Movement’s suffering servant theology—paraphrased as redemptive hope through sacrificial suffering—is based on the messianic connection of Isaiah 53 to certain parts of the gospel narratives. *See, e.g.*, JESUS AND THE SUFFERING SERVANT: ISAIAH 53 AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS (William H. Bellinger, Jr. & William R. Farmer, eds., Trinity Press Int’l 1998). Professor Stanly Hauerwas suggests that, for King, this connection also linked Gandhi to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. *See* Stanley Hauerwas, *The Weapon of Love: How Martin Luther King, Jr. Became Nonviolent*, ABC (Jan. 16, 2017), <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/01/16/4604568.htm>. The suffering servant theology was also evident in other clergy-led acts of civil disobedience throughout the Movement. I explore events like the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the infamous 1965 Bloody Sunday march over the Edmund Pettis Bridge as acts undergirded by a suffering servant theology, where oppressed people sought equality. *See generally*, JONATHAN C. AUGUSTINE, *THE KEYS ARE BEING PASSED: RACE, LAW, RELIGION AND THE LEGACY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT* 13–20 (ROM Publishing 2014).

30. *See generally* RICHARD LISCHER, *THE PREACHER KING: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE WORD THAT MOVED AMERICA* (Oxford Univ. Press 1995).

31. *Id.* at 73–76.

32. In describing his December 1955 election as president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association, King candidly details that things happened so quickly, he didn’t have time to consider his nomination and election. KING, *supra* note 1, at 56. Moreover, King writes that if he had considered it, in light of the time needed for a new pastor to serve his congregation, King probably would have declined the nomination. *Id.*

33. LISCHER, *supra* note 30, at 85–89.

In describing King's preaching and the Black Church's entry into the Movement's politics, Lischer writes:

By means of a wealth of literary, biblical, and philosophical allusions, [King] assured his hearers that history and universal moral law are aligned with the black quest for freedom. He wanted his potentially sympathetic white audiences to recognize the best of their own religious and political values in the mirror of his message. Like a priest, he mediated a covenant with which white moderates and liberals were comfortable He reinforced this commonality in many ways—with psychological jargon, popular religious sentiment, the grammar of inclusion, and by a synthesis of biblical and civil-religious rhetoric.³⁴

Accordingly, as the Movement began, King's preaching "got political" and the Black Church "got political," too.

King addressed the issue of race in political oratory, likening the struggle of Blacks in the Jim Crow South, with the struggle of oppressed Jews in the Old Testament,³⁵ while also making a rhetorical transition that brought the Black Church into political engagement. Lischer writes:

After the Boycott had commenced, King's Sunday morning sermons found a new purpose and vitality. The specificity of *race*, which he had assiduously avoided in his graduate education, now sharpened the point of his biblical interpretation and preaching. No one sermon captured the transformation that was taking place in him, but his first major rhetorical triumph, the address to the massed protestors at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, left him changed utterly.³⁶

Indeed, King's transformative oratory at Holt Street Baptist Church—an address filled with rhetorical tools developed in the Black Church's homiletic tradition—reminded America of the words of the prophet Amos, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,"³⁷ who similarly challenged governmental action, twenty-eight centuries earlier.

34. *Id.* at 10-11.

35. *Id.* at 83-84.

36. *Id.* at 85.

37. *Amos* 5:24 (New Revised Standard Version) (unless otherwise expressly noted, any and all scriptural references herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible).

B. Theological Convictions Undergirding the Black Church's Politicization During the Movement

As illustrated in *To Redeem the Soul of America*,³⁸ a book chronicling the 1957 origins of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its focus on egalitarian inclusiveness—arguably best evidenced through the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965—the Black Church's politicization was undergirded by a Judeo-Christian, suffering servant theology that focused on communal good instead of individual gratification.³⁹ The theological underpinnings that therefore supported a theology of sacrifice and suffering for the greater good, as part of the Black Church's politicization, were: (1) evangelical liberalism; (2) the moral duty to disobey unjust laws; (3) love and equality; and (4) the suffering servant messianic theology.⁴⁰ Each is briefly addressed herein, before transitioning to a contemporary understanding of Black Church politicization.

1. Evangelical Liberalism

King's theology of evangelical liberalism, focusing on human goodness and the church's necessary social role, was foundational in the Movement. It was also in direct contrast to the doctrine of evangelical conservatism that embraced a strict separation between the church and political issues.⁴¹ Indeed, as Albert Raboteau writes, in describing Black

38. FAIRCLOUGH, *supra* note 27. Further, Professor Garrow, a noted King scholar, also writes of King's proposal to deliberately name the organization the Southern Christian Leadership Conference "to emphasize that most of its participants and its potential popular base came from the [B]lack [C]hurch." DAVID J. GARROW, BEARING THE CROSS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 97 (William Morrow and Company 1986).

39. FAIRCLOUGH, *supra* note 27, at 81-82 (explaining the gratification students felt in literally sacrificing themselves in the Freedom Rides); see also Jonathan C. Augustine, *The Theology of Civil Disobedience: The First Amendment, Freedom Riders, and Passage of the Voting Rights Act*, 21 S. CAL. INTERDISC. L.J. 255 (2012).

40. Augustine, *supra* note 39, at 267-81.

41. Anthony E. Cook, *Beyond Critical Legal Studies: The Reconstructive Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY UNDERWRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT 85, 95 (Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. eds., 1995); see also Daniel O. Conkle, *Secular Fundamentalism, Religious Fundamentalism, and the Search for Truth in Contemporary America*, in LAW & RELIGION: A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY 317, 326 (Stephen M.

Church political engagement, “The churches not only reacted to social and political change; they also participated in making it happen.”⁴² Further, in noting the influence Black Church actors had in shaping American history through the Movement, noted church historian, Justo Gonzalez, writes:

In an unprecedented manifestation of faith, courage and perseverance, blacks by the thousands showed their determination to defy and unmask the oppressive laws and practices under which they lived. Through sit-ins, arrests, beatings, and even death, in places such as Montgomery and Selma, Alabama, they showed the world that they were at least the moral equals of those who had repeatedly accused them of being inferior. ‘We Shall Overcome’ became both a cry of defiance and a confession of faith.⁴³

This theology of evangelical liberalism undergirded the Movement’s actions toward active social justice.

2. The Moral Duty to Disobey Unjust Laws

King wrote what was arguably a treatise on civil disobedience in his famed *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.⁴⁴ In responding to fellow clergy members’ criticisms of his secular engagement and resistance to manmade laws, while incarcerated over Easter weekend in 1963, King

Feldman ed., 2000) (“[T]he formative religious traditions of the Western world—Judaism and Christianity—have for millennia embraced the conviction that their religious duty entailed active intervention in the ‘body politic.’”

42. A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS 124 (Oxford Univ. Press 2001) (1999).

43. JUSTO L. GONZALEZ, THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY VOLUME II: THE REFORMATION TO THE PRESENT DAY 485 (rev. & updated, 2nd ed. 2010).

44. King originally wrote the famed letter on April 16, 1963, after his Good Friday arrest in Birmingham, Alabama, while engaged in active civil disobedience in protest to discriminatory conditions in Birmingham’s business district. *See generally*, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, in WHY WE CAN’T WAIT (1964). My most recent scholarly publication pays tribute to King’s legacy of nonviolent resistance by connecting the famed biblical narrative of the three Hebrew Boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refusing to bow down and worship the golden deity with civil disobedience in the Movement. *See generally*, Augustine, *supra* note 27. In addressing the sociopolitical context in which King was arrested and wrote “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” David Oppenheimer, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, writes, “[i]n Birmingham, [King] faced the choice of obedience to immoral authority or disobedience and jail; he chose jail.” David Benjamin Oppenheimer, *Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth and Walker: The Events Leading to the Introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 29 U.S.F. L. REV. 645, 646 (1995).

wrote from Birmingham, Alabama:

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are *just* and there are *unjust* laws. I would agree with Saint. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."⁴⁵

In describing this theology's practical implementation, Peter Paris, professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary writes, "Since King had advocated time and again that those who acquiesce to evil participate in promoting evil and are, therefore, as much the agents of evil as the initiators themselves, he concluded that *one could not be moral by obeying immoral laws.*"⁴⁶ This theological underpinning is what motivated dissident actors, like the Freedom Riders, when they stood to sustain so much physical harm.⁴⁷

3. Love and Equality

King's egalitarianism was based on a theology of love, especially the belief in a transformative love to be used against his enemies. The University of Virginia's Charles Marsh writes, for example, about King returning to his home, in January 1956, after learning it was firebombed. In addressing a crowd that gathered in front of his visibly damaged residence, King shared, "We must love our white brothers . . . no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: 'Love your enemies . . .'" This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with

45. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 293 (James M. Washington ed., 1st ed. 1986).

46. PETER J. PARIS, *BLACK RELIGIOUS LEADERS: CONFLICT IN UNITY* 120 (2nd ed., 1991) (emphasis added).

47. *See, e.g.*, RAYMOND ARSENAULT, *FREEDOM RIDERS: 1961 AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE* (abr. ed. 2011).

love.”⁴⁸ This theology of love was a core part of King’s leadership.

Further, in detailing King’s willingness to unconditionally love those who opposed equality, Professor Paris also writes:

Not only was love in the form of nonviolent resistance in accord with God’s will, but, he claimed, it was the most effective means available to the oppressed in their fight against injustice. Indeed, he contended that there would be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed people developed the capacity to love their enemies.⁴⁹

This theological underpinning was very evident in King’s leadership and a core component of the Movement. Indeed, it was deeply engrained in King during his formative time at Crozier Seminary.⁵⁰

4. Sacrificial Suffering was Redemptive

In directly building on his theology of love, King also believed unmerited, sacrificial suffering was redemptive. In writing a February 6, 1957 article for *Christian Century*, King opined,

There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately, it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Easter drums. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. So in Montgomery we can walk and never get weary, because we know that there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.⁵¹

48. CHARLES MARSH, *THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: HOW FAITH SHAPES SOCIAL JUSTICE, FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO TODAY* 37-38 (2005).

49. PARIS, *supra* note 46, at 113.

50. *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 23-24 (Clayborne Carson ed., 1998).

51. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *Nonviolence and Racial Justice*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 9 (James M. Washington ed., 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. 1991) (1986) (emphasis added).

This Judeo-Christian theology of unmerited suffering as redemptive is arguably based on Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song,⁵² and most popularly witnessed on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, when non-violent marchers suffered significant attacks in crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge, in Selma, Alabama, while simply seeking the right to vote.⁵³

C. Contemporary Understandings of Black Church Politicization

The Black Church's engagement in politics is nothing new. University of Texas at Austin Professor Eric McDaniel, an active member of the AMEC and godson of its 112th elected and consecrated bishop, the late C. Garnett Henning, poses criteria to objectively measure *when* a Black church becomes political. In relying on qualitative and quantitative ethnographic research, through interviews with seventy-six pastors and members of Black congregations in Detroit, Michigan and Austin, Texas, McDaniel writes:

Specifically, a church becomes politically active when four conditions are met: the pastor [leadership] is interested in involving his or her church in politics; the members are receptive to the idea of having a politically active church; the church itself is not restricted from having a presence in political matters; and the current political climate both necessitates and allows political action.⁵⁴

Further, in testing the Black Church against the forgoing criteria, McDaniel also opines, "More than any other U.S. religious institution, the Black church serves as a symbol of religious political action."⁵⁵

Each of *Politics in the Pews'* seven chapters unpacks aspects of the

52. See *Isaiah* 53:4-12 (NRSV).

53. TAYLOR BRANCH, *AT CANAAN'S EDGE: AMERICA IN THE KING YEARS 1965-68*, at 44-57 (2006). Further, in celebrating the 40th and 50th anniversaries of the Act, I have written with Gene Thibodeaux, Chief Judge of the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal, and John Pierre, Chancellor of Southern University Law Center, respectively, to detail the incidents of Bloody Sunday and other social factors that lead to the Act's passage. See generally Jonathan C. Augustine & Ulysses Gene Thibodeaux, *Forty Years Later: Chronicling the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its Impact on Louisiana's Judiciary*, 66 LA. L. REV. 453 (2006); Jonathan C. Augustine & John K. Pierre, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: Faith, Social Action and Passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965*, 46 CUMB. L. REV. 425 (2016).

54. ERIC L. MCDANIEL, *POLITICS IN THE PEWS: THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF BLACK CHURCHES* 5 (2008).

55. *Id.* at 10.

book's central thesis, that the preciously cited four-fold criteria must be met for a Black church to be political.⁵⁶ In this section, I critique McDaniel's four-part criterion by matching it against either historical or contemporary application before synthesizing my literature and ethnographic research in the section that follows.

1. The Pastor is Interested in Involving His or Her Church in Politics

In support of his argument that a political church is a church holding political awareness and activity as salient pieces of its identity,⁵⁷ McDaniel highlights the fact that this identity begins with the pastor. "Conveyance refers to a pastor's communication of a need for political engagement on the part of the church For a church to become politicized, political identity must possess some level of salience with the pastor, who must convey this salience to members by attempting to take or encourage political action and to increase political awareness."⁵⁸ Recent sociopolitical attempts to setback America's civil rights agenda have created an atmosphere where the requisite salience is as prevalent today for AMEC pastors, as it was during the Movement, for pastors like King.

2. The Members Are Receptive to the Idea of Having a Politically Active Church

Although a pastor's willingness to operate in the political realm is one thing, that ability will be significantly limited without the church membership being receptive to political activity. Stated otherwise, "The concept of receptivity resembles the idea of support."⁵⁹ In expounding on this idea of receptivity, McDaniel argues that the sociopolitical environment will influence member attitudes and actions.

The environment can pressure an organization to assume certain roles that would not normally be seen as appropriate for that organization. A member may be more receptive to such activities if the church is in an environment that necessitates action. . . . [For example,] the legacy of the [C]ivil [R]ights [M]ovement should lead members of

56. *Id.* at 5.

57. *Id.* at 21.

58. *Id.* at 98-99.

59. *Id.* at 126.

southern churches to be more supportive of church engagement. The same should hold true in urban areas, where political entrepreneurs and parties have historically worked to mobilize individuals through their churches. (citations omitted).⁶⁰

In recent years, one could hardly watch the news or read periodicals without noting active faith-based, protest resistance in responding, for example, to environmental conditions necessitating the Black Lives Matter Movement, the aftermath of the United States' widespread controversial confederate monument removals that undergirded the August 2017 acts of racially-motivated hatred in Charlottesville, Virginia, as well as the resurgence of white nationalistic "dog whistle" rhetoric that has again become so commonplace in America. Indeed, environmental conditions again necessitate the Black church's political involvement and members have apparently been very receptive to her engagement.

3. The Church Itself Is Not Restricted from Having a Presence in Political Matters

McDaniel writes, "The Black church serves as the preeminent institution in Black social life."⁶¹ In addition to its ability to unite Blacks and defend their rights, however, McDaniel notes that "the church also receives criticism for its lack of action."⁶² Recent scholarship expounds upon a key observation: some pastors are less emancipatory and more concerned about doctrinal orthodoxy than liberation theology.⁶³ In the case of the prior, the church is much less likely to be engaged in political matters.

As McDaniel highlights, church politicization originates as a part of self-identity, where the pastor and members decide to become politically engaged. An argument can be made that the internal dynamics of the popularized megachurch phenomena prevent such political activity, notwithstanding external political factors. McDaniel writes:

Megachurches have an average attendance of three thousand or greater, and their numbers have grown exponentially since the early 1990s . . . Fewer than one-tenth of these megachurches are

60. *Id.* at 129.

61. *Id.* at 151.

62. *Id.*

63. Roger Baumann, *Political Engagement Meets the Prosperity Gospel: African American Christian Zionism and Black Church Politics*, 77 SOC. RELIGION 359 (2016).

predominately Black . . . In addition, the size of these institutions leads them to be highly professionalized, and members are not needed as volunteers . . . Further, megachurches cast a wide net in recruiting members, which may water down their message . . . [M]any megachurches have adopted a prosperity theology, which argues that God wants Christians to have material possessions and personal salvation. A message that focuses on material possessions undercuts the social gospel message for which Black churches have received praise. A move by Black churches away from a focus on social consciousness to a focus on individualism and material goods may present major problems for the defense of Black interests. (citations omitted).⁶⁴

The popularization of megachurches is, therefore, just one example demonstrating where the individualism of prosperity theology might supplant a church's engagement in social justice. Consequently, within such parameters, a church *will not* become political.

4. The Current Political Climate Both Necessitates and Allows Political Action

In critiquing the previous three criteria, I applied contemporary conditions that determine when a Black Church becomes political. In looking at the fourth, however, its analysis speaks to this paper's thesis and is more fully unpacked in the following section, wherein ethnography fully interacts with literature. To emphasize the parallel I seek to draw between conditions necessitating prophetic responsiveness during the Movement and similar conditions today, I highlight Lischer's description of King's responsiveness and his evolutionary transition as a Black preacher.

Prior to the Boycott, King was enjoying parish ministry and *did not* attempt to make any waves. "During the summer and fall of 1955 Pastor King reverted to a more philosophical style of preaching. He delivered well-rounded statements on the meaning of life, such as 'Discerning the Signs of History,' 'The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore,' and 'The One-Sided Approach of the Good Samaritan.' During the first year he rarely attacked the problem of racism in Montgomery . . ."⁶⁵ It was

64. MCDANIEL, *supra* note 54, at 154.

65. LISCHER, *supra* note 30, at 83.

only *after* the Boycott began on December 1, 1955, however, that King led his congregation—and ultimately the Black church—into political activism. Similar to the current America-first, nationalistic political climate in the United States—a climate that is energized through Trump’s “Make America Great Again” narrative—the then-political climate in Montgomery, and throughout the South, also necessitated the Black church’s prophetic response in the form of political engagement.

D. Synthesizing the Historical and Contemporary Analyses through Ethnographic Research with Bishops of the AMEC: “Make the Black Church Great Again!”

I argue contemporary perceptions within the Black Church parallel those of the Movement, such that nonviolent and prophetic, political resistance has again become necessary. McDaniel supports my underlying assertion that Black churches *are not* always political. Instead, they respond to environmental conditions necessitating political activity.

. . . African Americans have transformed existing institutions into political organizations. By using churches as a means of organization, socialization, mobilization, and participation, African Americans have realized some of their political goals. Nevertheless, the ability to do so has not always been constant. Historically, windows of opportunity have opened, such as Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the Black freedom struggle. In these instances, African Americans have entered the political arena using the Black church.⁶⁶

This perspective was almost uniformly confirmed by my ethnographic research, interviews with bishops of the AMEC. For example, Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram, the presiding prelate of the AMEC’s First Episcopal District, was one of the most outspoken ecclesial leaders at the September 6, 2018, “Call to Conscience” protest rally opposite the White House. He was also extremely active in secular politics, as a pastor, in Chicago and Detroit before his election to the bishopric.

The crux of this Article’s thesis is that the Black Church’s political responsiveness in the era of Trump parallels the need for its responsiveness during the Movement. In support of it, I respectfully

66. MCDANIEL, *supra* note 54, at 19.

argue as the political pendulum swung from Obama to Trump, white nationalist and neo-Nazi forces that were unearthed and galvanized during the Obama presidency not only led to Trump's 2016 election, but have also been emboldened to lead anti-minority public spectacles, like the August 2017 massacre in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁶⁷ For Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath, presiding prelate of the AMEC's 13th Episcopal District and former pastor of Mother Bethel AMEC, the congregation from which the AMEC began, violence is the direct parallel,⁶⁸ along with the same Evangelical Christians who have always supported an anti-progressive agenda.

In response to the question as to whether the Black Church's politicization is responsive to certain conditions, Bishop Leath remarked:

Yes; but, I think the term 'responsive' is relative to a particular context. In my mind there is a stream of political activism that manifested in the form of various revolts that goes back to Colonial America, up to the present. I don't think there's a start and stop point. Certainly, from Richard Allen forward, AMEs and the Black Church have been responsive, but there's [also] a steady flow, almost like the Gulf Stream. It's always there . . . Yes; the Black Church does respond, but I think there's been a consistent undercurrent of activism that's been present. You just see it at those times when you have the various stimuli that we've seen in recent years.⁶⁹

Moreover, in looking specifically at violence as part of my attempted parallelism between the conditions of the 50s and 60s that launched the Black Church into the Movement and activities of today, in the era of Trump, Bishop Leath also remarked:

67. Haberman, *Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again, Blames 'Both Sides'*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 15, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-press-conference-charlottesville.html>.

68. For example, on the morning of October 27, 2018, a matter of days before the 2018 midterm elections, an anti-Semitic, white nationalist entered Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and opened fire, killing 11 Jewish worshipers. Matt Zaptosky, Devlin Barrett & Mark Berman, *Suspect in Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting is Charged in 44-Count Hate-Crime Indictment*, WASH. POST (Oct. 31, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/suspect-in-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-charged-in-44-count-hate-crime-indictment/2018/10/31/bf2be61c-dd36-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html?utm_term=.0ea4949b543c.

69. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath (Oct. 30, 2018) (on file with author).

I think the Progressives are still in shock by the well-planned and methodical usurpation of political power by those on the political Right. It's almost like a segment of the populace has awoken to the fact that conservatives have control of state houses and legislatures and the "red wave" that came, seemingly overnight . . . The Black Church then has got to realize that it's going to take a sustained effort, years and in some cases decades, to undue much of what has been done and what's been put in place to work evil in the future. An emboldened tribalism exists

Social conditions . . . It would be interesting to see the data regarding social conditions, like the unemployment being low and, even in the Black community, people may be bringing more money home. Here is where I see there is credence in the theory: Violence stirs emotion. Emotion provokes action and action is the context in which people respond to change. So, in the 50s and 60s, all of a sudden, violence became televised. It was violence against marchers and peaceful protesters that fueled the Civil Rights Movement . . . the more violent, the more the response of the white community became. The same was true of in the 60s, when what occurred in the segregated South began occurring in the presumably non-segregated North. It was violence, in places like Chicago, that came in the form of responsiveness in the North. The assassinations of King, Malcom X and Robert Kennedy, these acts of violence sparked the Black Church. And, to very similar extent, its the modern-day violence against Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter Movement that has again awoken the [Black] Church. More than social conditions, it's violence that compels a response.⁷⁰

Indeed, although it is beyond the scope of the six preapproved questions, to Bishop Leath's point, in the wake of the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings, news outlets have reported recent increases in hate crimes, presumably because of Trump's often inflammatory and divisive rhetoric that incites violence.⁷¹

70. *Id.*

71. *See, e.g.,* Meg Oliver, *Pittsburgh Shooting Highlights Rise in Hate Crimes Across the U.S.*, CBS NEWS (Oct. 28, 2018), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pittsburgh-shooting->

Furthermore, in coming on the heels of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement and the refusal of multiple grand juries to indict police officers for the murders of numerous unarmed Black men,⁷² the Trump administration has underscored a sentiment of perceived injustice, similar to the sentiment that necessitated the Black Church's political activism in the Movement. Bishop Leath commented:

We didn't see it as much in the Black Lives Matter Movement as we see it now, but there is a banding together for the sake of survival. In the '50s and '60s it might have been keeping a shotgun handy, for protection. Now, we see people keeping a cell phone handy; keeping it charged. Videoing arrest, as they take place, along with police stops. It's a community banding together for the sake of protection and clearly this has been a responsiveness. Some might ask, 'Is that the church?' Yeah; well, I kinda think it is . . . Social media has almost replaced the church as platform for rallying and discussion, but not everyone is on social media. So, the [Black] church is still the platform for those political discussions.⁷³

Similarly, Bishop John R. Bryant (retired), son of the late Bishop Harrison James Bryant, addressed the necessity of Black Church political activism, then *and* now. Bishop Bryant affectionately and laughingly recalled his own political activeness, as a member of the AMEC, and his primary influence being his father, obviously a member of the AMEC clergy. He remarked:

highlights-rise-hate-crimes-united-states; Yascha Mounk, *The Nature of Trump's Culpability in the Pittsburgh Synagogue Massacre: The Shooter May Despise Him, But the President's Dehumanizing Language Has Made Political Violence—and Hate Crimes Like This—More Likely*, SLATE (Oct. 27, 2018), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/10/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-trump-rhetoric-antisemitism-civility.html>; see also NAACP Sees Continued Rise in Hate Crimes, Legacy of Trump's Racism, NAACP (June 29, 2018), <https://www.naacp.org/latest/naacp-sees-continued-rise-hate-crimes-legacy-trumps-racism>; Joshua Holland, *Yes, Donald Trump is Making White People More Hateful: A New Study Finds Empirical Evidence of the "Trump Effect,"* NATION (May 2, 2018), <https://www.the.nation.com/article/yes-donald-trump-is-making-white-people-more-hateful>.

72. Chantal Da Silva, *Eric Garner Death: NYPD Trial 'Opportunistic' Says Black Lives Matter Leader*, NEWSWEEK (July 17, 2018), <https://www.newsweek.com/eric-garner-death-nypd-trial-opportunistic-says-black-lives-matter-leader-1027741> ("Garner's death, as well as the refusal of the grand jury to indict Pantaleo over the death, sparked national outrage and fueled the early flames of the Black Lives Matter movement.")

73. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath (Oct. 30, 2018) (on file with author).

I can remember, sitting at the dining room table, with my dad, and I was in college at the time and I was sitting there with my big afro and whatever else I had on and he said to me, ‘What has made you so political?’ And I said, ‘You!’ He looked dumbfounded. I said, ‘You, Daddy.’ You’ve always been political . . . His political activism initially blocked him from getting into South Africa. Daddy was elected a bishop in 1964 and the South African government researched him and for 17-months kept him out . . . By this time, he was 65. A friend, a Baptist minister, said, “Yeah, Bryant was politically active, but he’s an old man now; he’s not going to go other there and cause any trouble . . . But, I watched my dad, the last time he was arrested, it was in Washington, DC, and he was arrested for demonstrating against South African apartheid.”⁷⁴

That was then. In speaking to the necessity of similar activism now, Bishop Bryant also referenced the need for budgeted fiscal allocations to hire staff persons, similar to those ministry heads in predominately white, mainline denominations, that can address social justice issues—particularly in the current era—to undo much of the damage that has been done in the last two years.⁷⁵

In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* prior to the November 2018 election, Derrick Johnson, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP”), reports of a survey conducted for the NAACP, by the African American Research Collaborative, that analyzed the views of African-American, white, Latino, Asian-American and Native American voters in 61 of the nation’s most competitive mid-term races, connecting the respondents attitudes toward Trump Administration policies, and using those responses to project likely election outcomes.⁷⁶ According to Johnson, “Eighty-one percent of black respondents were angry at Mr. Trump for something he has said or done, while 61 percent of whites felt the same.”⁷⁷ Based on these statistics, I anecdotally argue that the lion’s share of Black churches have returned to active political participation.

74. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop John R. Bryant (Oct. 29, 2018) (on file with author).

75. *Id.*

76. Derrick Johnson, Opinion, *Frustration with Racism is Coming to the Ballot Box*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 26, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/27/opinion/politics/mid-term-elections-race-polling.html>.

77. *Id.*

As a response to Trump's "Make America Great Again" narrative, one steeped with doom and gloom allegations of national decline, Ruth Braunstein argues the faith-based "Moral Perfection" narrative, exemplified by Obama and the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber, II, a politically active, black minister from North Carolina, can effectively engage the religious community's leadership in a political resistance movement.⁷⁸

In illustrating the moral perfection narrative's effectiveness and impliedly connecting it with the prophetic tradition of the Black Church, Braunstein uses the example of Obama's two inauguration speeches, in 2009 and 2013—dramatically differing from Trump's inauguration speech in 2017—as using King-type sacral oratory to portray America as a moral project that is not yet finished.⁷⁹ Braunstein writes, "The kind of story that Obama offered was not found on the national political stage during the 2016 election, but a version of this narrative still circulates in American public life, carried primarily by the leaders of today's growing . . . progressive religious movement, sometimes dubbed the 'Religious Left' or 'religious resistance' movement."⁸⁰ The Black Church is indeed a part of this "resistance movement."

Bishop Frank M. Reid, III, presiding prelate of the AMEC's 3rd Episcopal District, head of the AMEC's Office of Ecumenical & Urban Affairs and chair of its Social Action Commission, holds a unique place in AMEC history. Insofar as the AMEC has a legacy of political resistance, Bishop Reid is three-times a part of that legacy in that he is the only person whose father *and* grandfather were both AMEC bishops, too. Prior to his election to the bishopric, Bishop Reid was a politically active pastor, as leader of Baltimore's historic Bethel AMEC for almost 30-years. In discussing this resistance, Bishop Reid remarked:

The Black Church is 'political,' but it depends on how you define that word. The leaders of the Black Church were molded in the image of prophets as far back as the Old Testament. It is a great liberator or people and its goals have always been to obtain just policies and to put just policies in place. If that is political, then using a Star Wars symbol (analogy), when the Empire Strikes Back as it did when we moved from 8-years of Obama to now, two years of Trump . . . in these mid-terms we

78. Ruth Braunstein, *A (More) Perfect Union? Religion, Politics, and Competing Stories of America*, 79 SOC. RELIGION 172 (2018).

79. *Id.* at 180.

80. *Id.* at 181.

see a type of tribalism with neo-Nazis, and the alt-right, engaged with a politics of evil. But, Yoder wrote a book, *The Politics of Jesus*, so perhaps what might help to qualify it is to talk about the politics of the Kingdom of God and the politics of this world.⁸¹

Bishop Reid's comments support my assertion that the Black Church's political role is responsive to certain oppressive conditions. To paraphrase Bishop Reid, in a post-Obama world, the evil empire struck with its "Make America Great Again" narrative. The Black Church is now responding, in the image of both Old Testament prophets and Jesus, the messiah, in the form of a politicized liberating resistance.⁸²

Further and in the same vein, Bishop Bryant, also the son of an AMEC bishop, similarly stated that in the 50s and 60s, he was engaged in politics because his father was engaged in politics, well before his father's elevation to the bishopric. Liberating resistance is simply "who we are."⁸³ Bishop Bryant reflected:

My father was the vice president of the NAACP in Baltimore, which was the most active NAACP branch. When I think about his life, as an AME pastor, he was always engaged for justice. From being a young man in the church, all the way through, I can recall going to sit-ins . . . before Martin Luther King, Jr. made his moves.⁸⁴

As previously noted, the AMEC's September 5-6, 2018 events were termed a "Call to Consciousness." The question of the whether the Black Church is able to again be the proverbial "conscience of the nation" and lead a resistance movement in opposition to the Trump Administration is one of self-identity. Although several scholars note the particular contribution the Black Church has historically made in driving political engagement, undergirded by a progressive theology embracing emancipatory and social gospel themes,⁸⁵ recent scholarship also notes a

81. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Frank M. Reid, III (Oct. 22, 2018) (on file with author).

82. *Id.*

83. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop John Richard Bryant (Oct. 29, 2018) (on file with author).

84. *Id.*

85. See, e.g., Sandra L. Barnes, *Black Church Culture and Community Action*, 84 SOC. FORCES 967 (2005); Sandra L. Barnes, *Priestly and Prophetic Influences on Black Church Social Services*, 51 SOC. PROBS. 202 (2004); FREDERICK C. HARRIS, SOMETHING WITHIN: RELIGION IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM (1999); see also Eric McDaniel, *Black*

growing population of more theologically conservative, non-emancipatory Black Churches that *do not* identify as “political churches.”⁸⁶ This recent scholarship arguably has its foundation in Lincoln and Mamiya’s research, documenting why some in the Black Church tradition shy away from politics:

The usual answer proffered . . . is that this alienation from politics is caused by a deep involvement in religion, a religious otherworldliness that directs the believers’ attention toward the pie-in-the-sky rather than toward the troubles of this world.

While there is a sector of black churches and clergy who stress an otherworldly, pie-in-the-sky attitude toward everyday social and political problems, our research data on the seven mainline black denominations, which represent more than 80 percent of all black Christians, indicate that only 8.4 percent of the clergy supported the view of noninvolvement in such problems. In other words, the vast majority (91.6 percent) of black clergy nationwide advocated church involvement in social and political issues, and they advocated expressing their views in support of those interests with which they identified.⁸⁷

In addressing this phenomenon of self-identity and in speaking as a lifelong African Methodist, Bishop Bryant spoke to denominational identity, even if some individual congregations might be less emancipatory. He recalled:

When I was a young kid, my dad was already engaged; but, so were many others in the AME Church. For us, our political engagement obviously began before the 50s. I like to say that the AME Church—along with a couple of our fellow Black Methodists—never had to discuss whether the church ought to be engaged, politically. We were born out of politics. We were born out of social injustice and our response thereto. There was never a debate about whether we ought to be involved in liberation efforts . . . Although, maybe an individual congregation might not want to get involved, I can never think

Clergy in the 2000 Election, 42 J. SCI. STUDY RELIGION 533 (2003).

86. Baumann, *supra* note 63.

87. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 212-13.

of any instance when we as a denomination would not get involved.⁸⁸

Furthermore, according to Bishop Ingram, whether one chooses to label such activity as “political” is a matter of opinion. The important thing is that the underlying activity occur. The essence of such communal engagement, for Bishop Ingram, goes to the role of a pastor providing prophetic and priestly leadership to those he serves.

Politics, in and of itself is one thing. Politics sometimes makes for strange bedfellows. The fact of the matter is, I still stand in the role of the many clergy or preachers who, from a religious standpoint, speak truth to power. My issue is that those things that impact our people, as they relate to the prophet and priest, must be addressed by the pastor in the Black Church tradition. Even when I came out of seminary in 1975, [at] my first church, Allen Temple AME Church in Alton, Illinois, we led a protest against racial discrimination back then in ‘75 and ‘76. We did the same thing when I was a student in school, back at Wilberforce in the late ‘60s . . . I think, my role as a pastor and preacher is that, anything that effects the life of your people, should be addressed by the pastor. If people want to succumb and make that ‘political,’ so be it . . .⁸⁹

As a matter of ecclesial leadership philosophy for Bishop Ingram, therefore, if speaking truth to power and addressing secular issues affecting the lives of people he is called to serve is “political,” the Black Church is supposed to be political.

Since the Black Church is not monolithic, the topical question, “And When Does the Black Church Get Political?” begins as a matter of self-identification. As Bishop Ingram also makes clear, for the AMEC—unlike other less emancipatory denominations—that self-identification goes back to its liberationist founding. In responding to the question of whether he believed the Black Church’s political activity to be responsive to certain external, social and cultural forces, Bishop Ingram stated as follows:

88. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop John Richard Bryant (Oct. 29, 2018) (on file with author).

89. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Nov. 5, 2018) (on file with author).

Yes; but look back also to the time of the Harlem Renaissance. The Black Church's leadership has always been interested in the root of crisis in America's cultural order. The church—and especially the Black Church—provides leadership when things are in crisis.⁹⁰

According to McDaniel, it is almost commonplace in contemporary society for religious organizations to be politically engaged. He writes, “religious groups have chimed in on contemporary political issues. In such areas as placing the Ten Commandments in government buildings, advocating bans on gay marriage, or adding creationism to textbooks, the intersection of religion and politics is becoming evermore salient in the American political landscape.”⁹¹ A church's brush with politics, however, does not necessarily make it a “political church.” McDaniel argues that self-identity is at the core of when a church becomes political and whether it remains political. As part of self-identification, McDaniel also cites four factors as part of the inquiry. He writes:

A religious institution becomes a political organization when it incorporates politics into its identity. That is, politicized religious institutions decide that politics is an important means of achieving their overall goals. In attaining this end, four conditions must be met. First, leaders must advocate organization-based political engagement. Rank-and-file members must also agree that it is appropriate for the organization to delve into politics. The organization itself must facilitate and sustain political activity. Finally, the context in which the organization exists must be amenable to political action.⁹²

McDaniel goes on to argue that, in testing the Black Church against the forgoing criteria, “More than any other U.S. religious institution, the Black [C]hurch serves as a symbol of religious political action.”⁹³ Bishop Ingram's comments speak to this self-identity (especially in the AMEC) and his sentiment is shared by Bishop William P. DeVeaux (retired).

In a response to the question of whether he believes the Black

90. *Id.*

91. MCDANIEL, *supra* note 54, at 9.

92. *Id.* at 10.

93. *Id.*

Church was political during the 1950s and 60s, Bishop Ingram unequivocally shared:

Yes. Absolutely. Very much so. Rosa Parks, who of course was AME, was at the forefront of a political resistance because of the theology she was exposed to in the AME Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The AME Church was an anchor and political resistance was its birthright. This goes all the way back to its founding, of course, with Richard Allen and the walkout at St. George's⁹⁴

In other words, for Bishop Ingram, not only is political participation, in the form of resistance, a part of the AMEC's self-identity, it has historically been a keep part of the AMEC's undergirding theology.

Similarly, for Bishop DeVeaux, political participation is a part of the AMEC's DNA. Bishop DeVeaux has an arguably unique perspective on Black Church political engagement, considering the geographic areas he served as a pastor and bishop. As a pastor, Bishop DeVeaux led Metropolitan AMEC in Washington, DC (a/k/a "the Cathedral of African Methodism"), a congregation very near the White House. His also hosted, in 1993, the Inauguration Day Prayer Service for President Bill Clinton, while serving as Metropolitan's pastor.⁹⁵ Further, after ascending to the bishopric in 1996 and prior to his mandatory retirement in 2016, Bishop DeVeaux superintended the AMEC's Second Episcopal District, a geography covering the political bellwether states of North Carolina and Virginia, as well as Maryland and Washington, DC.

In response to my second question, about whether he would describe his ecclesial leadership as political, Bishop DeVeaux remarked as follows:

Yes. You can't function in the Black Church if you're not political. A more naïve way is to separate the secular from the sacred . . . a naïve view. Most Black pastors then were caught-up in the movement and, as a consequence of King, young pastors after then were all engaged in politics, too.⁹⁶

94. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Nov. 5, 2018) (on file with author).

95. *Inaugural Interfaith Church Service*, C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?37247-1/inaugural-interfaith-church-service> (Jan. 20, 1993).

96. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop William P. DeVeaux (Oct. 24, 2018) (on file with author).

This chronology, of those entering leadership positions in the Black Church after the Movement, speaks to a resurgence of an innateness that is simply a part of Black Church polity—especially AMEC polity.

Furthermore, in discussing the AMEC's political DNA, Bishop DeVeaux opines:

Internal politics was natural . . . People were elected bishops because they were good at church politics. They learned to be good at secular politics, too. The movement into secular politics was a natural progression because, as people were looking for answers, the church had to respond.⁹⁷

Indeed, this revelation from Bishop DeVeaux, is also present in the literature review. In relevant part, Lincoln and Mamiya write,

[T]he Black Church became the main area for Black political activity. Excluded from the mainstream electoral process, black people voted and chose their leaders in their churches, selecting pastors, bishops, trustees . . . the presidents of the conventions, women's auxiliaries, and the like. This surrogate politics carried on in the Black Church became an intensive training ground of political experience . . .⁹⁸

Argument can therefore be made that political participation is intrinsically part of the Black Church experience.

III. Methodology

The methodology employed to answer the topical question, "And When Does the Black Church Get Political?" was qualitative research.⁹⁹ Specifically, my qualitative research included an issue-focused analysis,¹⁰⁰ derived from fixed-question-open-response interviewing, based on an interview guide.¹⁰¹ The six questions that were presented, originally during email correspondence and then during electronically

97. *Id.*

98. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 3, at 205-06.

99. *See generally*, ROBERT S. WEISS, *LEARNING FROM STRANGERS: THE ART AND METHOD OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES* 3-14 (1st Free Press paperback ed., Free Press 1995) (1994).

100. *Id.* at 153-62.

101. *Id.* at 12-14.

recorded telephone interviews, are as follows:

1. Bishop _____ can you please give your insight on whether you believe the Black Church was political during the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement? If so, in what ways?
2. In thinking about your local leadership, as a pastor, and episcopal district leadership, as a bishop, would you describe yourself as having been political or leading those you served toward active political participation? If so, in what ways and what prompted your leadership toward political activeness?
3. Based on your experience, do you believe the Black Church's political activity is responsive to certain external social and cultural forces that necessitate responsiveness? If so, please explain.
4. Within the last two years, specifically since the Trump Administration came to power, have you seen social and cultural forces that necessitate responsiveness from the Black Church? If so, please elaborate.
5. On September 5 & 6, the AME Church's Council of Bishops hosted a two-day political action summit in Washington, DC, featuring workshops, a protest rally outside the White House, and a post-rally press conference. As one of the denomination's chief executives, can you please talk a little about what you believe necessitated the church taking a prophetic and politically active posture.
6. Final question: as someone who came to leadership in the Black Church after the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement, do you see any correlation or similarities between social conditions that necessitated political action during the 1950s and 1960s and contemporary social conditions necessitating action today?

Considering the AMEC's system of governance, wherein the Council of Bishops serves as its policy-making executive officers in setting the connectional church's political agenda, I felt the best qualitative and ethnographic research would result from interviews with select members of the Council of Bishops. Those whom participated in this study are listed below, with biographical information provided about them.

IV. Participating Bishops: The Subject Matter Experts

Below is biographical information on the five members of the AMEC Council of Bishops who assisted in verbally informing this Article.

Bishop John Richard Bryant (Retired)

Bishop Bryant, the AMEC's 106th elected and consecrated bishop, retired from active ministry at the AMEC's 2016 General Conference. At the time of his retirement, Bishop Bryant was the denomination's senior bishop. Just prior to his election to the episcopacy in 1988, Bishop Bryant served as pastor of the historic Bethel AMEC in Baltimore, a church his father, Bishop Harrison James Bryant, also served prior to being elected to the bishopric. Bishop Bryant has been actively involved in ecumenical organizations promoting social justice and civil rights, and has actively led such efforts as a member of the clergy. Bishop Bryant graduated from Morgan State University before earning his seminary degree at Boston University School of Theology. He also earned the Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

Bishop William P. DeVeaux (Retired)

Bishop DeVeaux, the AMEC's 113th elected and consecrated bishop, retired from active ministry at the AMEC's 2016 General Conference. At the time of his retirement, Bishop DeVeaux was presiding prelate of the Second Episcopal District, a geography including Maryland, Washington, DC, Virginia, and North Carolina. Prior to his election to the episcopacy in 1996, Bishop DeVeaux served as pastor of Metropolitan AMEC in Washington, DC. He is a graduate of Howard University and Boston University School of Theology, he also earned Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Vanderbilt University.

Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram

Bishop Ingram, the AMEC's 118th elected and consecrated bishop, is the presiding prelate of the AMEC's First Episcopal District. Prior to his election to the bishopric, Bishop Ingram was a very politically active pastor in Chicago, Illinois and Detroit, Michigan, where he served Oak Grove AME Church. He is a graduate of Wilberforce University, a AMEC-run education ministry, and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He also earned the Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary.

Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath

Bishop Leath is the AMEC's 128th elected and consecrated bishop. He currently serves as the presiding prelate of the AMEC's 13th Episcopal District (the states of Kentucky and Tennessee). Just prior to his election to the episcopacy, Bishop Leath served as senior pastor of Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, the oldest parcel of real estate owned by African Americans. Bishop Leath is a graduate of Yale College and Yale Divinity School. He also earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary.

Bishop Frank M. Reid, III

Bishop Frank Reid, the AMEC's 138th elected and consecrated bishop, holds a unique place in the AMEC, as the only person to ever serve as a third-generation bishop. He currently serves as the presiding prelate of the AMEC's 3rd Episcopal District (Ohio, West Virginia and parts of Pennsylvania), the denomination's head of Ecumenical & Urban Affairs and chair of its Social Action Commission. Prior to his historic election to the episcopacy in 2016, Bishop Reid served for almost 30-years (since 1988) as pastor of the historic Bethel AMEC in Baltimore where he was a very politically active pastor. Bishop Reid succeed Bishop Bryant, as a pastor. Bishop Reid earned degrees from Yale College and Harvard Divinity School, before earning his Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary.

V. Theological Reflection and Contemporary Application

The Movement was undergirded by a suffering servant theology that viewed suffering as redemptive.¹⁰² This Judeo-Christian theology motivated both clergy and laity, including students, to engage in dissident acts/civil disobedience that was legally, even if not practically, supported by the First Amendment. From a sociological perspective—even if no longer based on theology—the same undergirding belief of unmerited suffering being redemptive, as exercised through civil disobedience,¹⁰³ has recently supported the #BlackLivesMatter Movement as well as the counter narrative demonstrations responding to

102. See, e.g., *Isaiah* 53:1-12 (NRSV). In previous scholarship, I have argued that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the Movement's empirical measure of success, allowing Blacks to tangibly and numerically participate in the full exercise of citizenship. See generally, Augustine, *supra* note 39.

103. See generally, *Daniel* 3:1-18 (NRSV).

Trump's "Make America Great Again" narrative.

Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song, presumably written to offer hope and inspiration to Israelites living under the Babylonian Exile's oppressive conditions, depicts extreme and unmerited suffering in the name of redemption. Its theology permeated the Movement. In relevant part, it provides as follows:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed . . .

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth . . .¹⁰⁴

Although it may be debated whether the suffering described in Isaiah 53 was done by the people of Israel or was messianic, describing Jesus the foretold Christ, its theology clearly undergirded King and the Movement.

Further, the Movement's suffering servant theology also supported acts of civil disobedience, where the willingness to suffer motivated adherents to willingly accept the consequence of their dissident actions.¹⁰⁵ While taking biblical root in the popular Daniel 3 narrative of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three Hebrew boys who were thrown into the fiery furnace for civilly disobeying a governmental

104. *Isaiah* 53:4-5 (NRSV); *Isaiah* 7-9 (NRSV).

105. Indeed, from the perspective of orthodoxy, dissident actions in the form of civil disobedience include an understanding that a governmental actor issued a command and/or order and/or law that the dissident actor deems morally and/or theologically unacceptable. The suffering servant theology motivates the action because, with suffering viewed as redemptive, the actor is willing to openly and publicly accept the consequences of their action or inaction. For a detailed exegetical comparison of Jewish oppression during the Babylonian Exile and Black oppression during Jim Crow as motivating civil disobedience, my most recent scholarly article honors the 50th anniversary of King's assassination by emphasizing this connection. *See generally*, Augustine, *supra* note 27.

command with which they took moral issue, this connectedness between the suffering servant theology and dissident acts of resistance undergirded the entire Movement.

Similarly, from a sociological perspective, I respectfully argue this same willingness (although less influenced now, in the post-modern era, by Judeo-Christian orthodoxy) to publicly accept the consequences of dissident actions when one morally disagrees with a governmental command/law/order/policy, is a philosophy that undergirded the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. Consequently, if history suggests theology has indeed influenced sociology, the legacy of the Black Church's political resistance theology is alive and well as a counter to the "Make America Great Again" narrative in the era of Trump.

VI. Findings

Several themes emerged though the course of my literature research. I felt some of the themes were extremely informative and enriching to the overall scope of my research. There were other themes, however, that I may not have initially regarded as salient, but proved to be so, through my process of coding. Specifically, I saw a thematic patterning in interviewees on the topics of: (A) resistance; (B) history; and (C) liberation. Each is briefly addressed below.

A. Resistance

The thematic thread of resistance almost uniformly ran through each interview, connecting them one to another. This thread also ties closely to history. As detailed in the biographical portion, wherein background information on each participating bishop is detailed, those who assisted in allowing me to question them are some of the brightest and most accomplished members of the clergy to ever serve in the AMEC. I sensed that for them, the topic of Black Church political participation was only one part of a much larger narrative that is theologically embedded into the AMEC. In other words, I detected a distinct theme that a theology of resistance—only part of which includes "getting political"—is innately a part of leadership in the Black Church tradition, generally, and African Methodism, specifically. In addressing the political nature of the Black Church and specifically connecting it to resistance, Bishop Ingram shared as follows:

It's a misnomer to say that the Black Church *just* got political in the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Church has always been political and was born in politics, resistance, and political struggle. The AME Church's political origins are the result of its resistance, back in 1787, right here in Philadelphia, with Richard Allen. Consequently, I mean, the *ethos* of everything that has happened in the Black Church came from a political perspective and the AME Church has been intimately involved in politics from its beginnings.¹⁰⁶

This summary of Bishop Ingram's theology of ecclesial leadership, in the form of resistance, was also extremely evident in a response from Bishop Reid, who specifically remarked on the Black Church's political resistance as follows:

The AME Church's political resistance is born out of a prophetic history that traces its roots to the prophets of old, and Jesus, who Albert Clegg called the Black Messiah and who James Cone called the liberator of Black and/or oppressed people . . . To call it 'political' is almost to put a worldly standard on it . . . The AME Church was birthed in politics; but it was a politics of resistance.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Bishop DeVeaux also identified a politics of resistance in his responses. While gratuitously espousing, in response to the first question, he offered:

. . . Well, even prior to the '50s and '60s, as far as the Black Church goes, the leadership of the church was political . . . usually very involved in the community and the leadership of the community was usually involved in the church. This led to a natural position of resistance because of all that was going on . . . those things . . . giving rise, then, to the movement . . . Most of us got caught-up in the movement because of what Dr. King had done and it would have been an anathema for us, as young preachers, to not be involved in the resistance movement that was going on all around us . . .¹⁰⁸

106. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Nov. 5, 2018) (on file with author).

107. *Id.*

108. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop William P. DeVeaux (Oct. 24, 2018)

Indeed, the Black Church's politics of resistance was intricately interwoven throughout the foregoing responses.

B. History

I also found a historical pride, in political participation and encouragement, as something the Black Church is "supposed to do." Indeed, in addition to being prideful, regarding some of the AMEC's 18th and 19th century history, Bishop Ingram also reflected on Rosa Parks, a member of St. Paul AMEC in Montgomery, Alabama, in citing her courageous leadership as the Movement began.

If you go back and start with the origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and look at a sister like Rosa Parks, who incidentally was a stewardess in the AME Church and who later became a deaconess, and I think that when you look at the backdrop of the Black Church itself . . . we serve as a backdrop, along with the many ministers who gave leadership, to the ongoing struggle for liberation that is a part of the Black Church's history . . .¹⁰⁹

As I considered this shared perspective among the respective bishops, although it did not initially occur to me, I find it compelling that each of them is a "Son of the Parsonage," and at least a second-generation part of Black Church political leadership. The only qualifying exception would be that Bishop DeVeaux's father who, although an ordained member of the clergy, served on active duty as a military chaplain. Regardless, however, in affectionately highlighting some of the Black Church's history, especially as it relates to political engagement, Bishop DeVeaux remarked:

I believe the Black Church has historically been political because history suggests it was at the core of our community's existence. It was the one thing, as part of the social fabric of America, that we owned. For instance, if you wanted to have a meeting, if an organization . . . an African American fraternity or sorority . . . was attempting to organize, history tells us that they did so at or through the church because it was the centerpiece of our community.¹¹⁰

(on file with author).

109. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Nov. 5, 2018) (on file with author).

110. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop William P. DeVeaux (Oct. 24, 2018) (on file with author). As an aside, this historical point, as shared by Bishop William P. DeVeaux,

Furthermore, in also addressing the point of historical significance, Bishop Reid referenced history by sharing:

We are reacting to "today" because we are not wrestling with the weighty question of how we can solve this and make it better, so the next generation can move on. That's what we've lost and that's what the culture has caused us to lose, because we have become an ahistorical people. So, I'm going to close the answer with a contemporary reference. I went to see, last weekend, *The Hate U Give*, with my family and I bought the book and started reading the book . . . The author uses certain names to represent the KKK and one or two of them were victims of the terrorism in the Black community, and so, the shadow of TuPac runs throughout the movie and throughout the book . . . The hate is not new. It's a part of the history that we've [the AME Church] has fought against and it's the same type of hatred we are again dealing with now.¹¹¹

Bishop Leath, who was the longest-serving pastor of Mother Bethel AMEC in Philadelphia before his election to the episcopacy, remarked on the Black Church's history to protest and political activism, in the South, but in a separate vein addressed political protest in places like Philadelphia. He remarked:

I think that in the South, where there was a lot of [political] activity, the church clearly was a staging area and it provided space and leadership. That is true, as well, to a certain extent, but maybe not as well-researched or documented . . . for example, in a place like Philadelphia, where you have transit protest, even as early as the '40s, you also have people like a [Reverend] Leon Sullivan, who rises to the forefront. And, um, in both North and South, the church and Black preachers in

deeply resonates with me. The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana, the state's primarily African American masonic organization, was founded at a church I previously served, Historic St. James AMEC, in the early 1860s. See *A Brief History of Historic St. James AME Church*, ST. JAMES A.M.E. CHURCH, <http://www.stjamesameno.com/a-brief-history-of-historic-st-james-ame-church/>. Considering the congregation was formed in 1844 and its building constructed in 1848, to Bishop William P. DeVeaux's point, history suggests it was probably the only option.

111. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Frank M. Reid III (Oct. 22, 2018) (on file with author).

particular, have a history of being outspoken community leaders.¹¹²

In analyzing my interviews, each of the respective bishops tied current day Black Church political engagement with historical events that are part of the Black Church's history. This was a shared pride that is deeply embedded in each of the bishops.

C. Liberation

In addition to resistance and history, my analysis also evidenced a theme of liberation. This too was a uniform sentiment expressed by all participants, especially by Bishops Bryant and Reid. Indeed, it should not be surprising that they would so prevalently share such a common sentiment. Both men, Bishops John Bryant and Frank Reid, III, served as pastors of Bethel AMEC in Baltimore just prior to their episcopal elections, as did both of their late fathers, Bishops Harrison Bryant and Frank Reid, Jr. I can anecdotally share that Bethel Baltimore is a church deeply steeped in Black Liberation Theology. Accordingly, it is logical that although my findings show liberation as another common thread running through all this research's discourse, it was most prominent in the discourse with Bishops Bryant and Reid.

While Bishop Bryant spoke of Black Church politicization in terms of liberation by connecting it to a congregation's exposure, Bishop Reid did so by connecting it to educational empowerment. Both Bishops Bryant and Reid used the term liberation in addressing congregational exposure, an aspect of Black Church polarization at the intersection of McDaniel's first and second points of analysis.

In addressing political exposure as a means of increasing congregational understanding and capacity, thus leading to liberation, Bishop Bryant fondly recalled one of his early pastorates in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He shared as follows:

I can remember when I was pastoring in Cambridge, Mass., I was on a board and asked to speak somewhere. As I was sitting on the dais, the Holy Spirit told me to look for your people. I looked in the audience . . . No one was there. It was at that point I stopped accepting individual board appointments. If someone

112. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath (Oct. 30, 2018) (on file with author).

asked me to serve, I asked that the seat be designated for my church. That way, my people, with certain expertise could be partnered with the non-profit or the community agency or governmental agency, to help them grow. The more they grew, the more the church grew.¹¹³

For Bishop Bryant, this was a deliberate attempt to liberate the people he was tasked to lead. Similarly, in an effort to expand individual horizons, while simultaneously encouraging civic and political engagement, Bishop Reid remarked about the role of the Black preacher in bringing liberation through exposure. His desire as a pastor was to be prophetic and expose others.

For Bishop Reid, the pastor as a liberator in the Black Church tradition is associated with the pastor's ability to educate (and expose) the congregation to the liberating love of Jesus. In relevant part, he shared:

The pastor is supposed to liberate by teaching and demonstrating Black economic empowerment; issues of the Black Power generation verses the Civil Rights generation. Now the issue of the Black Live Matter generation is a reflection of the liberation that is sought out by oppressed people . . . This goes back to James Baldwin, as an [Harlem Renaissance] author, versus Richard Wright and Richard Wright versus Langston Hughes . . . That is the liberation that oppressed people are looking for and it comes through the love of Jesus and . . . through the church.¹¹⁴

Additionally, for Bishop Ingram, the pastor's role in bringing liberation to people is impliedly a part of the *munus triplex* doctrine.¹¹⁵ While indirectly referencing the doctrine (he did not expressly state it, nor did

113. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop John Richard Bryant (Oct. 29, 2018) (on file with author).

114. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Frank M. Reid III (Oct. 22, 2018) (on file with author).

115. In summary, the *munus triplex* doctrine relates to ecclesial leadership, noting the three domains or offices in which members of the clergy serve: the priestly, prophetic, and royal/kingly domains. *See, e.g.*, DAN B. ALLENDER, LEADING WITH A LIMP 185-99 (1st ed. 2006). After briefly tracing the Old Testament's history of the respective offices, Yoder writes, "All three of these functions were picked up in the New Testament as ways of describing what Jesus fulfilled. The word Messiah really means prophet, priest, and king because it means the anointed one." JOHN HOWARD YODER, PREFACE TO THEOLOGY: CHRISTOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD 235 (2002).

he identify the doctrine's third element, kingly/royal leadership), Bishop Ingram stated:

For me, being engaged in the community and making your people aware of what's going on is really a part of the pastor's prophetic and priestly roles . . . I stand in the shoes of many clergy and religious leaders who speak truth to power. My issue is that those things that effect my people, just like we made reference a minute ago to those four prepositional phrases, "in the community," "for the community," "with the community," and "by the community," . . . our marches and protests, as a prophetic and priestly leader, and you know, my role as a pastor, was to bring liberation to the people I was sent to serve . . . I view this type of liberation in the historic roles of the prophet and the priest.¹¹⁶

Indeed, my findings reveal that the three elements of resistance, history, and liberation, and intimately tied to the Black Church's inherently political posture.

VII. Discussion

There are inherent issues that must be substantively addressed to "Make the Black Church Great Again." From a historical perspective, a suffering servant theology not only undergirded the Movement, but it also influences contemporary resistance, like the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. The Black Church's return to "being political," however, cannot be limited to electoral politicization. Oppressed groups need advocates who can issue a proverbial and literal "call to consciences" that leads to liberation through social justice. Insofar as I have argued that the fundamental right to vote was the measure of full citizenship in the Movement, as far as the era of Trump, social science, literature and ethnographic research suggests "next step" actions are necessary for complete liberation.

If next step politicization means hiring lobbyists to ensure certain legislation passes and other legislation gets buried, in the respective states and in Congress, the fact that hate crimes and violence are up in the era of Trump means the Black Church must again get political. If

116. Digital recording: Interview with Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Nov. 5, 2018) (on file with author).

next step politicization means budgeting for and hiring professional staff to address constituency issues (e.g., education reform and charter school advocacy in urban communities), indeed, *it is* time for the Black Church to again get political. Moreover, if next step politicization means partnering with government, under the Faith-based Initiative, for the provision of social services (e.g., job skills training, etc.) in communities that need them the most, again, it is time for the Black Church to get political. If there's anything positive that can potentially come from the era of Trump, my research intersects with contemporary social concerns by anecdotally arguing that a "self-help" and "self-sufficiency" will meet a theology of liberation that truly will create a counter narrative that will, "Make the Black Church Great Again."

VIII. Conclusion

And *when* does the Black Church get political? The Black Church gets political when conditions necessitate political responsiveness. The Black Church *is not* and has never been monolithic. Some within the Black Church's construct are more interested in dogma and orthodoxy than liberation theology and social activeness. Regardless of theological bend, however, this Article supports the assertion that the Black Church's organized engagement in secular politics is responsive to social conditions that are generally external to the church itself. In other words, while fully acknowledging the existence of politics within the Black Church (e.g., elections for bishop, association or convention president, etc.), I argue the Black Church *gets political*—engages in external politics—when conditions necessitate it taking an active political posture.

Notwithstanding the Black Church's well-documented history of political engagement, going as far back as Reconstruction, this Article draws a parallel between the Black Church's external political engagement during the American Civil Rights Movement and the era of Donald Trump. In both timeframes, social conditions were and/or have been seen as repressive. Consequently, the ecclesial voice of prophetic leadership, in the form of the Black Church's political participation, has arisen to be a social agitator.

In response to the white, nationalistic rhetoric that has recently been represented in the "Make America Great Again" narrative, the Black Church responded during the November 2018 midterm elections, as did so many Americans, with a level of political engagement that has not been seen since well before the historic Civil Rights Movement. An old

axiom provides that, “For every action there is a reaction.” The Trump era action of white nationalistic rhetoric and discriminatory treatment of minorities has caused a reaction of politicization in the Black Church. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” narrative has created a time to “Make the Black Church Great Again!”
