A Sociohistorical Analysis of the Black Church as an Educational Institution: Understanding Parishioners’ Engagement and Motivation to Seek Higher Education

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SCHOLARLY AND GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Learning from the experiences of Black adult learners within the Black church provides an opportunity to learn from a culturally relevant space that has deeply rooted historical ties in the Black community. The over-arching research question in this study is: How does the Black church meet the needs of its adult learners, and what can higher education institution learn from these practices to retain Black students while creating a more inclusive environment? While research on adult learners is plentiful, the intersection of the Black church as a lens in which to design more culturally relevant spaces and pedagogy has not been as prominent. These experiences provide insight into how higher education institutions can provide a more learning centered and welcoming environment for Black students. This mixed methods study centered on the experiences Black adult learners who engaged in educational programs within the Black church. The quantitative analysis focused on preset motivational dimensions to measure how they impacted the adult learners’ reasons for participating in church based adult education using a survey instrument. The qualitative analysis centered on their experiences during their engagement in the educational programs and their reasons for engaging through utilizing semi structured interviews. The findings suggest that adult learners perceived their experiences within the Black church as ones in which they developed a greater sense of empowerment and achievement. The participants’ construction of their experiences was guided by their conceptualizations of what it meant to be Black student in an educational setting, and more specifically in the Black church. There were four major themes that highlighted the experiences of these adult learners, which included: (1) The Black church shielded learners from negative identity association, (2) Advocacy from the Black church was considered significant to learner engagement, (3) Trust in the educational spaces contributed to the learners’ success, (4) Culturally relevant learning spaces positively influenced learner engagement. The findings of this study continue the discussion on how adult learners make sense of their experiences related to the Black church and higher education, and more importantly how create more inclusive learning spaces that remove barriers for Black students.
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Chapter One

Introduction

The Black church has historically served as a source of motivation and inspiration for its members through its provision of a broad spectrum of services and activities to promote the educational advancement of the African American community (Isaac et al., 2001). In many ways, the unique position of the Black church relative to education has been shaped by the structural racism and inequalities that prevented African Americans from pursuing public education through the same channels available to the White majority in the United States (U.S.). Given these longstanding structural impediments to educational opportunities for Blacks, it is important to examine how elements of the Black church have helped to organize, shape, and influence the scholastic advancement of the African American community.

Public education in the United States has a long and complicated history of marginalizing and discriminating against African American students. Indeed, deeply entrenched and systemic racism has resulted in educational segregation at all levels of the educational ladder. These barriers have spurred many in the African American community to rely on the church for a wide array of services, including, but not limited to, education (Isaac et al., 2001). According to Calhoun-Brown (2000):

Black churches have been aggregated into the singular institution called “the Black church” to the extent that they are united by their cultural, historic, social, and spiritual missions of fighting the ravages of racism by “buoy[ing] up the hopes of its members in the face of adversity and giv[ing] them a sense of community—regardless of denominational distinction, geographic location, or class composition. The Black church
has stood at the forefront of this movement, providing a safe space in which to educate its parishioners and communities.” (p.169)

Throughout history, African Americans have relied on the church for various social services, including education (Frazier & Lincoln, 1974; Frazier, 1963). Congregations were encouraged to take an active role in the advancement of their communities and have “sited education as one of the primary means of achieving social progress for the Black community” (Leak & Reid, 2010, p. 239). According to Isaac et al. (2001), “the church not only serves as a place of spiritual worship but also as a refuge from racism and a location where African Americans may learn values, knowledge, and skills” (p. 23). Owing to the racism and negative stereotypes that Black people were subjected to, it was important for the Black church to restore a sense of value and positive racial identity, especially among the Black youth. According to Lincoln and Mamiya (1999), investing in the uplift of cultural identity and self-esteem for young Black youth is of primary importance, regardless of socioeconomic status. They cited the dolls test conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1947), which was a significant factor in the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools in 1954. According to Jordan and Hernandez-Reif (2009), “the overall results from this landmark study illustrated that young Black children raised in the 1930s preferred White dolls and judged the White dolls as superior to duplicate dolls of Black skin color” (p. 86). The dolls test was used to prove the negative impact that segregation had on the Black students’ racial identity and how it subsequently damaged their self-esteem (McNeill, 2017). The Black church became an important institution in giving voice to the Black community in their fight against racism and grassroots organizing (Leak & Reid, 2010).
The Black church is one of only a few institutions in society that have been exclusively owned and operated by African Americans. African Americans’ ability to own property has been fraught with discrimination, especially related to acquiring loans from the banks. The Black church was able to play a critical role in the education of Black people, which included formal and informal learning (Barnes, 2005). Importantly, the church has also played a longstanding and vital role in creating various educational opportunities for the Black community with the intention to further the skills and knowledge of its members.

Examining the historical influence of the Black church could augment our understanding of ways to intervene within the widening graduation gap in higher education between African American and White students. Nichols et al. (2016, p. 1) cited that “a recent report indicated that among 232 four-year, public secondary schools that saw improved overall graduation rates from 2003 to 2013, more than half (53%) saw gaps between Black and White students either stay the same or increase.” Booker (2016) outlined the experiences many Black students face at predominately White institutions (PWIs):

Research shows that African American students enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have experiences vastly different from their African American counterparts attending historically African American colleges and universities. African American students have reported harassment, hostile classroom interactions, feelings of disidentification, exclusion, and low self-esteem. (p. 218)

Black students who attend PWIs tend to have a more difficult transition to college than their white peers, including the cultivation of a sense of belonging that ultimately affects their retention. Strayhorn (2019, Chapter 2, para. 12) noted that “belonging needs take on increased significance in environments or situations that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or
foreign, as well as in contexts where certain individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported or unwelcome.” According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), the four-year graduation rate for Black students in 2010 was 21%; in contrast, the graduation rate for their White peers was 45%. Figure 1 highlights the vast disparities that still exist between White and Black students in obtaining higher education. Despite the fact that enrollment for Black students has increased over the past 10 years, there is still a long way to go to bridge the gap and thus increase the successful matriculation of Black students.

**Figure 1**

*College Graduation Rates*

The ongoing discrepancy between matriculation rates for Black and White college students highlights the importance of exploring the practices of the Black church and how these practices influence the educational aspirations of the African American community. The influence of the Black church in furthering the education of Black learners in institutions of higher/adult education has long been recognized. However, little research has examined the role of the Black church in motivating African Americans to pursue higher education (Isaac, 2005; Leak & Reid, 2010). According to Isaac et al. (2001), “Although the church has been a major
provider of education for African Americans, we know very little about African American adult learners’ reasons for learning” (p. 24). What we do know is that the role of the church in education has evolved to address a complex range of issues driven by our modern culture and evolving needs. Central to the research of Isaac et al. (2001) was an exploration of the individual motivations of learners, grounding them within a greater multidimensional framework that will be discussed later in this dissertation.

With a clearer understanding of the factors and processes that encourage adult learners to participate in higher education opportunities, we will more intentionally be able to structure programs within the church and beyond. The insights gained from this investigation have the potential to influence the design of programs for African American learners in both formal and informal institutions of learning with the ultimate goal of increasing the matriculation rate of Black students in higher education institutions in the United States.

**Purpose of the Dissertation**

This study aimed to examine the influence of the Black church on the decisions of adult learners to participate in church-based adult education and therefore to inform higher education initiatives devoted to increasing the recruitment, retention, and academic success of Black students. The Black church has been an anchor of educational equity in the Black community and continues to serve as a significant resource. This study is designed to scrutinize and offer a better understanding of the effects of the Black church as a catalyst for parishioners seeking higher education. This dissertation will address the scholarly gaps in the role of the Black church’s educational framework for learning that attracts and retains adult learners. I seek to provide further understanding for why adult learners seek the Black church as a site for learning and how these rationales inform interest or persistence in higher education. In this study, the
focus will be on adult learners, defined as those who are over the age of 18 or who have obtained their high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED). The literature review in Chapter 2 will provide a review of the associated literature that can serve to appropriately position the Black church in contemporary society as an educational motivator for African Americans. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing research on the Black church and its potential impact on educational parity in higher education (Barnes, 2005; Booker, 2016; Isaac, 2005; Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

Using the theoretical foundation of adult learning theory and motivational theory, this research examines the connections between adult education and the Black church. African Americans have had a long and violent history when it comes to education in the United States (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For example, in Mississippi, the following law entitled The Alabama Slave Code of 1833 included:

Any person who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than two hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars.

Harpers Weekly published an article that stated, “The alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved refuse to teach them to read.” There was fear that slaves who were literate could forge travel passes and escape (Smithsonian American Museum of Art, 2020).

These types of laws were commonplace in many states and have had a long-lasting influence on the circumstances of African Americans and their education even in our current society (Reece & O’Connell, 2015). Reece and O’Connell (2015) argued that “consistent with research on how slavery and its legacy shape the social structure of place, we argue that slavery had lasting impacts on the educational system within the South, such that Black relative to White
public school enrollment will be positively related to the strength of the local historical slave concentration” (p. 44). African Americans have long seen education as an important equalizer in terms of overcoming their circumstances and providing a better life for themselves. The church’s ability to provide members with an atmosphere of empowerment, familiarity, and engagement sets the stage for a meaningful and sustainable learning environment (Mitchell, 2010).

Although the Black church has an established history in providing educational opportunities and being able to attract significant numbers of African Americans, published research on contemporary adult education in relation to this important institution is limited. Researchers of adult education oftentimes overlook the Black church as a space for culturally relevant learning, formally and informally. As noted, the Black church has long played a key role in promoting the educational aspirations and achievement of the members of the African American community (Billingsley, 2003). Issues related to race have always played a role in shaping the framework of U.S. educational policies and the access that African Americans have to higher education (DeCuir-Gunby & Schultz, 2017). Understand the history of segregated education in the United States is important to envision the church’s role as a support system and an educational champion for African Americans. The laws that perpetuated the lack of equality and access to educational opportunities for African Americans have been challenged in the court system, which exposed the grave inequalities that existed within U.S. public school systems (Green, 2004). Collective civic engagement was one of the ways in which the Black church contributed to dismantling unjust educational systems (Barnes, 2005).

One of the most “influential” civil rights movements related to education was that which led to the landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. This case was a direct challenge to the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling of 1896, which upheld the doctrine
of “separate but equal.” The case that came to be known as *Brown v. Board of Education* was actually the name given to five separate cases that were heard by the U.S. Supreme Court concerning the issue of segregation in public schools: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Briggs v. Elliot*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA.)*, *Boiling v. Sharpe*, and *Gebhart v. Ethel*. Although the facts of each case are different, the main issue in each was the constitutionality of state-sponsored segregation in public schools (Central Community College, 2020).

All of these cases represented the cause of young Black students who attended inferior public schools with inadequate resources. Throughout the development of these cases, the Black church served a critical and supportive role, helping to propel the cases toward the national spotlight. During early periods of segregation within school systems, active resistance against integration was initiated, and some schools opted to shut down rather than allow Black students to attend. Black churches stepped in to fill the educational void left by these systems. Many churches operated private schools to educate Black students during this tumultuous time in the field of education. Pastors, community members, and educators from the Black church were instrumental in pushing for change to dismantle the unjust policies. The role of the Black church continues to shape the educational endeavors of African Americans, and we must seek to understand the nature of its influence as a tool to provide a more culturally competent climate in higher education (Johnson-Bailey, 2006).

Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) proposed, “If the church is the institutionalized expression of the religious life of a people, as many sociologists generally believe, then the Black church is a powerful institution” (p. 428). This connection is particularly important for adult learners who may assume that their educational opportunities are limited by various
socioeconomic challenges, poor performance in earlier school settings, or some combination thereof. Mitchell (2010) stated:

The Black church and education have always been so closely intertwined that the relationship has presently escaped the gaze of mainstream educational research. For example, the very foundation of freedom for enslaved Africans in the U.S. was a dogged faith in a higher power that was sympathetic to her/his unjustly treated people, combined with an unyielding pursuit of freedom through education to improve their material circumstance. (p. 203)

Seeking education as a method of obtaining a better life remains a deeply rooted principle in Black culture (Williams, 2009). The Black church has served as a safe space for African Americans to explore their educational curiosity and feel supported in their endeavors. The cultural importance of these varied roles in influencing what and how adult learning was facilitated should not be undervalued and merits further investigation.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to help determine exactly how or why the Black church motivates members to participate in church-based educational opportunities. The body of literature on African American student motivation and achievement is surprisingly scant; moreover, much of it is focused on comparative studies at the K–12 group level. Thus, given the fact that college matriculation rates among Black students continue to lag behind those of White students, there is a pressing need to understand if and how the church influences interest or persistence in higher education among its parishioners. Similarly, by investigating the efficacy of faith-based adult education programs, one could more intentionally structure educational programs within higher education institutions that more intentionally support student success.
Overview of Chapters

This mixed-methods investigation was designed to examine the role of the Black church as an educational institution in promoting the educational aspirations of adult learners. Chapter 1 has introduced the study and its purpose and provided a description of the research problem. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of relevant literature significant to understanding the sociocultural role of the Black church in the lives of African American adult learners and details the conceptual framework that guided this study. Chapter 3 presents the rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach for the data. Chapter 4 presents the findings from quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. To close, Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions and presents directions for future research.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

To provide a framework for this literature review, I have divided this chapter into four sections. The first section describes the relevant history of the Black church in relation to its role in providing educational and social empowerment to its members and the broader community. The second section details the impact of faith-based organizations on community organizing and outreach. The third section presents a theoretical framework for adult learning and its effectiveness in nontraditional learning environments. The final section reviews the pertinent motivational theories that have been used to evaluate African Americans in educational settings. This section also highlights the work of Dr. Sandra Graham at the University of California, Los Angeles, who is a prolific researcher in the area of African American student motivation.

The Historical Role of the Black Church

Researchers have long noted the significance of the Black church in the lives of its members and more broadly within their local communities. According to Harris (1987), “The Black church was born during slavery and continued to grow and thrive throughout each phase of American history” (p. 3). Historically, the Black church and its leadership have served the community in numerous capacities, including via the roles of an educator, a social welfare conduit, and a civil rights advocate. Isaac et al. (2001) affirmed the influential role of the church in the African American community, which included providing educational resources especially when access to them was limited.

W. E. B. DuBois, through his numerous empirical studies, is one of the earliest sociologists to study the Black church as a social institution. Although DuBois found important
differences among Black churches based on their location, size, preaching style, and denomination, he asserted that the church was an integral part of Black life (Billingsley, 1999). E. Franklin Frazier is considered one of the most influential African American sociologists of the 20th century, and his groundbreaking work on the Black church has been widely cited by scholars. An important concept that Frazier put forth is the “function of the Black church as a dynamic institution responding to the changes in the social environment” (Billingsley, 1999, p. 8). Frazier also established a connection between the church and education in fulfilling its social mission, noting the church’s contributions to organizing school and after-school programs, supplementing teachers’ salaries, and awarding scholarships to students (Billingsley, 1999). The Black church has played a significant role in the lives of its members as well as in response to an ever-changing social environment that has been traditionally governed by race and privilege. Thompson and McCrae (2001) gave credence to the idea that “the Black church tradition restored the therapeutic cycle that had been broken by the enslavement process” (p. 42). This restoration has historically provided many African Americans with the support and guidance they needed to survive—in many cases under unimaginable conditions.

Historically, African Americans were systematically excluded from higher education institutions owing to racism and segregation. The implications of this long-standing segregation have had effects that still resonate within educational systems and among many African Americans. The Black church, according to Isaac and Rowland (2002), was strengthened by the notion that its African American members were bound together in the struggle for equality and freedom. Indeed, the researchers noted that for many African Americans, “the church has been a place for them to have their human worth and dignity reaffirmed and a place for them to garner strength to survive in an oppressive society” (p. 3). Note that although scholars use the terms
Black church and African American church interchangeably, for the purpose of this review, I will utilize the term Black church when referencing this institution.

Regarding the Black church, it is important to stress that numerous distinct denominations have historically been included in this religious community. Battle (2006), for example, listed eight major denominations that can be considered to encompass the make-up of the Black church: African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist Episcopal Zion; Christian Methodist Episcopal; Church of God in Christ; Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship; National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.; and Progressive National Baptist Convention. With respect to total membership, DiIulio (1999) stated that these eight major Black denominations include about 65,000 churches and 20 million members. Table 1 indicates the churches by denomination and size. Denominations listed with an asterisk indicates these denominations have been put together to share an approximation of size across all the Baptist denomination.

**Table 1**
**Black Church Denominations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Full Baptist Church Fellowship</td>
<td>*13.5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>National Baptist Convention of America</td>
<td>*13.5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Progressive National Baptist Convention</td>
<td>*13.5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal</td>
<td>3.5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church</td>
<td>1.2 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Christian Methodist Episcopal</td>
<td>800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Church of God in Christ</td>
<td>5.5 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Full Gospel Baptist</td>
<td>*13.5 Million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the Black church is divided according to various theologies and practices, a commonality of spirituality among African Americans is the primary focus of these collective
institutions. According to Hinton (2009), “Although the Black church may vary in doctrine and mission, substance and style, nearly every African American, and most other Americans, will conjure up an image of what ‘Black church’ means” (p. 20). The term Black church, as described by Pattillo-McCoy (1998), “encompasses any predominantly Black congregation, even if it is part of a predominantly White denomination” (p. 768). African Americans’ long-standing devotion to their religious beliefs has had an enduring impact that has influenced their participation within the Black church. Gallup and Castelli (1989), in fact, argued that “American Blacks are, by some measures, the most religious people in the world” (p. 122). This assertion is exemplified by the high frequency of church attendance and membership among African Americans as well as by the prevalence of prayer in their daily lives (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998).

The Black church’s roots in the African American community are deep and rich. The Black church has long been a focal point in the African American community, providing essential social services to the community (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Harris (1987) noted that the autonomy of the Black church remains one of its most powerful tools, concluding that “because the church is independent of the White power structure, it is uniquely and strategically capable of positively impacting upon the urban condition” (p. 7). Similarly, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) maintained that the Black church is an important “center of activity in Black communities” (p. 769), serving as a place for social gatherings, political movements, and community activism. In many instances, the Black church has been a stable refuge for African Americans facing the economic decay of inner-city urban neighborhoods.

The church provided various social services to bridge the gap left by segregation, racism, and discrimination, which included education (Isaac et al., 2001). Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) described this heritage as follows:
For nearly half a century African American parents, their children, leaders, and organizations have been in the forefront of efforts to desegregate schools so that African American children could receive a quality education. In the process, they have endured enormous hardships and sacrifices for limited gains. (p. 429)

A 2014 study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life indicated that, overall, African Americans were more religious by a variety of measures than the overall U.S. population, with 79% of African Americans identifying as Christian. Figure 2 outlines the results by race.

**Figure 2**

*Religious Commitment by Race*

| By many measures, African Americans are more religious than whites and Latinos |
|---|---|---|
| % of ___ who ... | Blacks | Hispanics | Whites |
| say they believe in God with absolute certainty | 83% | 59% | 61% |
| say religion is very important | 75% | 69% | 49% |
| say they pray daily | 73% | 58% | 52% |
| say they attend religious services at least once a week | 47% | 39% | 34% |

The same study also concluded that African Americans were more religious than Whites and Latinos. According to Masci (2018) from the Pew Research Center, 83% of African Americans say they believe in God with absolute certainty as compared with 61% of Whites.
According to Chaves and Higgins (1992), Black churches are more inclined than White congregations to participate in social justice reforms, social activism, and advocacy. In addition, they are more likely to sponsor activities aimed at enhancing the lives of the disenfranchised members of their communities. The resources provided by many churches include programs designed to assist those who may be facing problems, for example, with unemployment, food security, illness, and substance abuse. The Black church provides support, often in the form of educational programs, counseling, and food banks, to help address the immediate and long-term needs of its community. Isaac and Rowland (2002) concluded that the educational torch that shined so brightly in the historical Black church continues to influence its successors today. It is not unusual to find adult educational activities taking place seven days a week in today’s Black churches. Isaac and Rowland (2002) affirmed this: “Each week millions of African Americans rely on the preacher’s sermon to render messages of hope and affirmation” (p. 3). Given the sizable number of African Americans who claim membership in one of the 65,000 churches nationwide, the Black church has a powerful opportunity to address the educational inequalities that have impacted many of its members. In addition to education, the familial networks that are formed in the Black church oftentimes represent relationships that are rooted in support, love, trust, and common faith.

**The Black Church as a Social Support System**

The role of religion in the lives of African Americans has been researched in various contexts, including the framework through which the Black church provides an informal social support network and a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging may have further implications on African Americans’ level of participation in church-related activities. Taylor et al. (2001) asserted, “extended family, friends, church members, neighbors, and fictive kin constitute
complementary sources of informal support for African Americans” (p. 439). The term *fictive kin* refers to family-linked labels (e.g., brother, sister, uncle, and aunt) that are given to individuals who do not have an actual legal or biological familial relationship but still play an influential role in the lives of younger community members (Taylor et al., 2001).

As discussed earlier, the dominant presence of religion and spirituality in the lives of many African Americans has been a commonly accepted notion in the cultural research of this population (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Mattis and Jagers (2001) implied that research within the social sciences on African American religious practices and spirituality has been limited in scope, primarily focusing on the Christian experience. Nonetheless, abundant research has suggested that extended families and the church are the two most influential factors for Black Christians. Chatters et al. (2002, 1998) argued that the church could provide support for addressing the complex issues that have the potential to undermine motivation and paralyze individuals. Despite an acknowledgment of the importance of these networks, little research has been conducted on the nature and functions of these informal network systems (Chatters et al., 2002). One notable exception is Lincoln and Mamiya’s (1990) groundbreaking research on the Black church that provides crucial insights into the relationships between Black families and the influence of the church.

According to Thompson and McRae (2001), “The need to belong expresses the fundamental importance of relationships to well-being” (p. 40). In essence, all individuals seem to have a desire to connect with other people and seek fulfilling relationships that provide a sense of support and care (Thompson & McRae, 2001). Oftentimes, these relationships are found within the church, where people share a common faith. Historically, African Americans have been associated with collective identity, where their worldview is aligned with a group rather
than an individual (Thompson & McRae, 2001). During slavery, this mentality was not only prevalent but also necessary for survival, as African Americans faced cruel and abhorrent treatment. The Black church has served as an anchor in the Black community that brought together people with similar values, experiences, traditions, and cultures (Thompson & McRae, 2001). The importance of the association between family and religion in the lives of African Americans can also be found in some of the terminology used by believers. Mattis and Jagers (2001) cited a commonly used phrase in the African American community: “The family that prays together stays together” (p. 526). A church family has been deemed as an important relationship that serves as another level of support outside of the biological family (Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

An important dataset used by many researchers who investigate the religious affiliations of African Americans is the National Survey of Black Americans. Although the study is over 20 years old, its significance in examining the relationship between the church and African Americans remains relevant to this field of study (Chatters et al., 2002). Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) found that “51% of the churches involved in their national survey of churches claimed to have ongoing family outreach programs, and 31% provided services to children and youth.” This high level of programmatic outreach in Black churches further underscores the importance of family and fictive kin for church members.

The article “Belongingness, the Black Experience, and the Black Church Tradition” presents a summary of a study conducted by Thompson and McRae (2001), who sought to “apply a theory of belonging as a framework for a more systematic understanding of the therapeutic function of the Black church tradition” (p. 40). According to the authors, “the Black church tradition restored the therapeutic cycle that had been broken by the enslavement
experience” by providing a sense of identity, normalcy, and affirmation of value (p. 42). A recurring theme in the literature emphasizes how group processes tend to create norms, which in turn foster a sense of identity and help to guide personal behavior. Church networks similar to families are prone to dysfunctional relationships that can be unpleasant and also cause distress (Kraus et al., 2000).

**Practices of Affirmation**

The African American sermon has traditionally served as one of the primary tools to encourage, support, and educate congregations. Isaac and Rowland (2002) referenced the work of Courlander (1976) on the delivery of Black oral literature and how it is deeply rooted in and relies on the “implicit or explicit intellectual or emotional responses to the injustices and inequalities inherent in the historic relationship of Blacks to the mainstream culture” (p. 3). Oftentimes, the imagery and experiences associated with the message in sermons provide parishioners with coping mechanisms and hope for the future. According to Thomas (2016), African American preachers utilized the oral traditions of West Africa to mimic the verbal and nonverbal expressions relevant to their audience. The African American sermon incorporates a framework rooted in conveying belief, uplift from undesirable circumstances, and the power of the spiritual realm (Davis, 1985). Preachers often use historical injustices to highlight the plight of African Americans overcoming years of racial discrimination and social exclusion (Mitchell, 2010).

Isaac and Rowland (2002) described the African American preacher as an “individual who employs imagery and sounds to awaken the senses and move the churchgoer from listener to active participant” (p. 3). Understanding the components of a typical sermon in the Black church is important to understand its influence on its members and as a cultural artifact and an
ongoing tool of affirmation in the Black church. Isaac and Rowland (2002, p. 5) analyzed 10 typical sermons, revealing the 5 overarching themes shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Sermon Themes in the Black Church*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-ethnic personalities and experiences</td>
<td>A common practice among African American preachers is to mention names of people and places throughout their sermons. They not only use characters from the Bible but also use the names of living and celebrated people of African descent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-ethnic social experiences</td>
<td>A very important aspect of providing cultural relevancy is to recognize and appreciate the learner’s experiences. The African American sermon provides numerous examples of the African American experience in America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-ethnic psycho-cultural</td>
<td>People of African descent have continually received negative messages about themselves. It is important for preachers to deliver sermons that reverse the negative mindset that has stifled the African American community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrocentric affirmations</td>
<td>Although an African American preacher discusses the various negative experiences of African Americans, he or she is also skillful in affirming the listeners. Preachers often remind listeners of how they have been successful in spite of the injustices they have faced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-ethnic metaphors</td>
<td>African American sermons are replete with metaphors. Metaphors are used to bring life or imagery to selected texts and give added meaning to sermons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of particular relevance to this study is the self-ethnic psycho-cultural theme, which is defined as follows: “people of African descent have continually received negative messages about themselves. It is important for preachers to deliver sermons that reverse the negative mindset that has stifled the African American community” (p. 5). This theme further illustrates the important role the Black church plays in minimizing the psychological damage that many African Americans suffer owing to the negative acculturation and systematic oppression associated with being Black in America. Many of these negative messages have been reinforced through the educational systems, including K–12 and higher education.
Resisting structural racism is especially important for those wishing to support the success of learners who may be directly impacted by these practices (Jordan, 2012). Bailey et al. (2017) defined the term structural racism in the following way:

Structural racism refers to “the totality of ways in which societies foster [racial] discrimination, via mutually reinforcing [inequitable] systems… (eg, in housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, criminal justice, etc.) that in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources,” reflected in history, culture, and interconnected institutions. (p. 1455)

Depending on an individual’s race, class, and gender, the educational system in the United States has historically served as a source of privilege, disadvantage, or mobility. The theme of Afrocentric affirmations is also important, as it speaks to the ability of preachers to “remind listeners of how they have been successful in spite of the injustices they have faced” (Rowland & Isaac, 2007, p. 5). This theme highlights the perspective that preachers can have sermons on the negative experiences of African Americans as a basis of challenge but also as a source of pride, hope, and tool for survival. Black preachers are expected to connect their sermons to the modern circumstances and issues that affect the members and ensure that the sermons serve as a resource to higher education by providing culturally relevant education.

The Role of Race and Racism

Racism has shaped the development of the Black church as an institution charged with mitigating the effects of its devastation on the Black community. The Black church has a long tradition of stressing the importance of Black heritage, culture, and experiences (Barnes, 2010). McCoy and Rodricks (2015), while outlining a framework for critical race theory, quoted the work of Adams et al. (2013) in defining racism:
Racism is the set of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal patterns and practices that create advantages for people legally defined and socially constructed as “White,” and the corollary by the dominant power structure in the United States. (p. 58)

Owing to the numerous negative images and depictions that plague Black people in the United States, it is important to find a place that reaffirms the humanity and dignity of being unapologetically Black. In Race Matters, Dr. Cornel West (1993) described the idea of double consciousness, according to which Black people have to balance the ownership of their Black heritage and the reality of living within the systemically oppressive culture of White supremacy in the United States. Barnes (2010) acknowledged that based on the complex nature of racism and its constantly evolving manifestations, it is more important now than ever to use public education as a platform and tool to dismantle the social and structural inequities faced by African Americans. According to Tatum (2008), “the impact of racism begins early, even as early as our preschool years” (p. 3). This impact can have a long-standing influence on the educational path of children, particularly when they participate in an uninterrupted system that perpetuates this culture. The Black church in recent years has been called upon to reinvigorate its role in closing the achievement gap between Black and White students (Barrett, 2009).

According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), relative to systems of higher education, “access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum has been almost exclusively enjoyed by White students. Tracking, honors, and/or gifted programs and advanced placement courses are but the myriad ways that schools have essentially been re-segregated” (p. 28). Historically, the Black church has been at the forefront of bringing the injustices suffered by African Americans to the attention of the broader American society. Acknowledging and examining the role of the Black church in addressing the psychological racial fatigue often faced by African Americans is important.
The Historical Role of the Black Church in Education

The history of education for African Americans in the United States has been plagued with disproportional resources, exclusion, and violence (Johnson-Bailey, 2006). Johnson-Bailey (2006) described the peril of educating Black people in the United States: “For approximately 300 years (1619 to 1868), during which the critical masses of African Americans were enslaved, it was illegal or unacceptable to educate people of African ancestry in most of the states in the Union” (p. 106). Smith (2004) noted that in response to the lack of educational opportunities for African Americans, the Black church historically presented a source of proactive support, giving weight to the historical relationship between the church and higher education institutions. The church provided various social services to bridge the gap left by segregation, racism, and discrimination, which included education (Isaac et al., 2001).

Although asserting that all African Americans who attend predominantly Black churches find the connection, guidance, and support that is so prevalently discussed in the literature would be misleading, it is undeniable that the lives of millions of African Americans have been touched by the leadership of the Black church (Billingsley, 1999). A recurring theme in the literature is that during times of unrelenting crisis and personal turmoil, the African American community has turned to the church for guidance, leadership, and support. Through the years, that support has manifested itself in many forms, including, but not limited to, educational and personal development activities. Further, in times of significant crises, the Black church has played a pivotal role in helping its congregation face seemingly insurmountable challenges. The civil rights movement was one such period characterized by the crisis of injustice and discrimination toward African Americans, particularly in the realm of education. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) pointed
out that studies on the civil rights movement recognize the preexisting structure of church-based networks in addition to the financial resources that the Black church provided to the movement.

With respect to specific educational advancements for the Black community, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the doctrine of “separate but equal,” had long-standing effects for African Americans in receiving access to systems of quality education. However, it was not until the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that the separate but equal doctrine that prevented African Americans from attending the same schools as White students was overturned. Despite the fact that segregation in education was legally prohibited, considerable resistance to integration remained, which still has ramifications for our contemporary educational institutions and practices. Peterson (1999) described the many drawbacks of integration:

Integration had not proven to be the solution for the racial ills of this nation. The dream was for African Americans to have the benefit of the same (and it was assumed better) education as Whites. However, this meant that African American students who had been previously taught in a nurturing environment by African American faculty who understood their needs were now being taught by White teachers who had not yet developed sensitivity for their new students. They often judged differences in appearance, speech, and mannerisms as inferior to the White students with whom they were more familiar. (p. 83)

To resolve this issue, many Black churches organized educational gatherings focused on increasing the awareness of civil rights issues, literacy skills, and organized schools. Oftentimes, the Black faculty that previously taught students during segregation would participate in these education gatherings. Since the civil rights movement, many Black churches have created
mentorship programs and public partnerships and have established tutoring programs (Barrett, 2009; Jordan & Wilson, 2017).

Sociocultural theory combines the influences of society and culture on an individual and communities. Cherry and Morin (2019) defined it as “an emerging theory in psychology that looks at the important contributions that society makes to individual development. This theory stresses the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live. Sociocultural theory also suggests that human learning is largely a social process” (p. 1). Social influences such as poverty and racism in combination with the cultural toolkit of the Black church make this theory ideal for the present study.

Culturally Relevant Learning

The Black church and its practices are deeply entwined with literature on culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings (1994, 1990) defined culturally relevant teaching in the following way:

...pedagogy of opposition, not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 165)

Ladson-Billings (1994) referred to “culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of the opposition” (p. 160). She emphasis that opportunities must empower communities and not just individuals so that the impact can be felt throughout generations (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2014). The ability to challenge the educational status quo requires that students have support from the
social systems that recognize that change is necessary. Owing to their prior negative experiences with public education system, many African Americans decide to forgo additional formalized educational opportunities, believing that they are incapable of success. Guy (2004) pointed out that “it is impossible to comprehend the cultural experiences of African Americans in modern society without also understanding how racism functions to segregate and denigrate their Black identity and culture” (p. 44). Overcoming these societal roadblocks is the theme of Guy’s writings, which emphasize providing culturally relevant education that connects with the learner and meets them where they are. According to Sheared (1999), giving voice to the historically oppressed and marginalized students in the classroom to express their worldview presents an opportunity for students to connect with the classroom and material in a more authentic and genuine manner. Students can express their lived experiences that may include their experiences with racism, gender, and religion. Cervero et al. (2001) contended that “adult education cannot be a neutral activity in the continual struggles for the distribution of knowledge and power in society” (p. 6). Therefore, an intentional effort must be made to include the marginalized groups that are too often left behind on the outskirts of higher education.

Based on research that targets culturally relevant pedagogy, it seems logical that an important place to concentrate adult education efforts that could benefit African Americans would be a centralized institution such as the Black church (Barrett, 2009; Isaac, 2005). The educational framework of the church extends beyond religious education and incorporates “history, theology and the arts” (Rowland & Isaac, 2007, p. 1094). Unfortunately, these needs have become increasingly important in view of literacy rates for African American teens and adults, which are significantly lower than those of their White peers according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006).
Many researchers believe that faith-based community organizations provide a nurturing, inclusive environment that attracts the participation of those concerned with social change. Typically, these community activists come from all walks of life but share an interest in making their communities better places to live. Isaac (2005) asserted that the Black church’s role in adult education would continue to be vital, particularly considering the several factors that are contributing to the decay of the urban community. Some of these contemporary factors include unstable economic conditions, the departure of businesses to overseas locations, and a decline in the quality of education for poor neighborhoods. The Black church and faith-based organizations overall have become increasingly concerned with educating their members in the areas of healthcare awareness, job training, literacy, and financial empowerment. Wood (2002) indicated that “faith-based organizations begin in local organizing committees, most of which are associated with individual religious congregations” (p. 23). As noted by Johnson-Bailey (2006), an important site for adult education for cultural survival was the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), a national organization that is a major sponsor of adult education programs for African Americans.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is especially important for Black people owing to the impact that racism and stereotypes have had on their academic achievement. Current research on racial identity and type casting has centered on the notion of stereotype threats (Okeke et al., 2009), which were first introduced by social psychologist Claude Steele. This concept suggests that an awareness of societal stereotypes related to one’s identity could negatively influence one’s performance academically and beyond (Marx et al., 1999; Steel, 1997). According to Okeke et al. (2009), “Researchers have consistently found that in a stereotype threat condition, individuals underperform on cognitive tasks compared with non-group members” (p. 368).
Brand et al. (2006) found that stereotypes significantly influenced students in the classroom, which demonstrates the importance of the social context of the learning environment. Brand et al. (2006) also found that:

The African American students’ discussions provided insight into the damaging effects that stereotypes had on their relationships with teachers. The students believed that the negative characterizations of African Americans in society placed them at a disadvantage because they feared the teachers’ perceptions of them were predetermined. (p. 234)

This fear and perceptions can influence how students challenge themselves in the classroom (Brand et al., 2006). Helplessness, or “learned helplessness,” is an attribute that has been widely associated with Black students. Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which people learn how to behave in a helpless way in certain situations. Learned helplessness can be an outcome of ongoing exposure to environments that perpetuate these kinds of stereotypes for marginalized students. Further complicating the psychological conditions of Black students being taught in historically White spaces is the manifestation of racial battle fatigue.

Racial battle fatigue develops in African Americans and other people of color much like combat fatigue in military personnel, even when they are not under direct (racial) attack. Racial battle fatigue is a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily (e.g., racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritants, unfair treatments, including contentious classrooms and potential threats or dangers under tough to violent and even life-threatening conditions. (Smith, 2004, p. 180)

Black people may spend intense energy protecting themselves against everyday racial microaggressions rather than focusing on their primary responsibilities at work, home, or school
(Franklin, 2016). Students of color may have to spend time and emotional energy dealing with the stress-induced symptoms owing to racial microaggression instead of applying that energy to their academic pursuits, which can further disrupt their educational experience and successful matriculation (Franklin, 2016). Solórzano et al. (2000) found that Black students faced racial microaggressions on campus, in their classrooms, and beyond, which led to an overall unwelcoming campus climate that negatively impacted their sense of belonging.

**Sense of Belonging**

The Black church is a model of ways to provide a sense of belonging to at least some individuals. Overall, a sense of belonging is when you feel connected to others as well as to your environment (Goodenow, 1993). In higher education, the term has been used to justify the expanded recruitment and retention of Black students in programs at PWI’s. Strayhorn et al. (2012) defined a sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling of sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 3). People want to feel connected to their environment and be able to authentically be themselves in all of their associated social identities; however, in most situations, this is not possible owing to social stigmas, stereotypes, and the accepted norms of the environment that do not fit the lived experiences of the newcomer (Strayhorn, 2019; Green et al., 2019). The Black church has long provided a space for people to escape the rigor of the outside world. It has historically served as a safe space for education, social services, community, and opportunities for leadership that had been denied in other secular spaces. Thompson and McRae (2001) stressed the importance of the Black church’s role in helping people “overcome the marginality of being both ‘in-both’ and ‘in-between’ different and
opposing cultures” (p. 42). African Americans oftentimes have a dualistic existence in which they live in a society that is rooted in White supremacy and by its very nature is malignant cancer to their health and well-being. According to Thompson and McRae (2001), psychological stability and mental health have been restored to many African Americans by the Black church through a renewed sense of identity, value, and acceptance, particularly during times of struggle and loss. Strayhorn (2019) described the sense of belonging as a “feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members needs will be met” (p. 54). The connection that the Black church provides for its members is fulfilling a fundamental need for belonging and relatedness. This sense of belonging can serve as a conduit to learning in the Black church by providing an educational framework designed to affirm, support, and uplift its learners. The next section further explores the motivation theory and African Americans as well as the importance of belongingness and relatedness as a motivational framework.

**Cultural Theory**

The Black church is an exemplar of ways to celebrate and create repositories of Black culture. Swidler (1986) described culture as “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, rituals practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life” (p. 271). Culture can be manifested in various ways that then influence our behaviors, actions, and values. Swidler (1986) suggested that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values towards which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool’ kit of habits, skills and style from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (p. 273). Cultural theory is referenced in this study to explore how the cultural tools employed in the Black church influence the behaviors of parishioners in relation to educational opportunities. According to Serrat (2017), cultural theory “seeks to define heuristic
concepts of culture. Hence, cultural studies often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class, and gender” (p. 32).

Barnes (2005) suggested that the Black church utilizes these cultural tools to provide engaging and effective educational environments. Swidler (1986) also suggested that culture could reinforce the expectations of institutions and provide a shared understanding of values and group dynamics. Culture, as noted by Barnes (2005), can provide motivation and meaning that can assist in mobilizing people around ideas and concepts. This theoretical approach uniquely addresses the idea that components of the Black church’s culture are inextricably tied to the group and individual identity of some believers. Accordingly, this study examined the relationship between the Black church’s ability to instruct and process the socialization of culture and its influence on the educational aspirations of its members.

African Americans and Motivation Theory

Early Findings

Irvin Katz was among the first psychologists to highlight motivation as an influencing factor related to the achievement gap among minority students in the 1960s (Guy, 1999). Now, over 50 years later, African American children continue to experience failure at an increasingly disproportionate level, and motivational theory is considered an important construct to explain this phenomenon. Graham et al. (1998) discussed a more relevant motivation theory for explaining minority underachievement:

Black underachievement focused on the study of achievement values among this population. Unlike achievement-related cognitions which focus on beliefs about abilities (“Can I do it?”), values have to do with desires and preferences (“Do I want it?”) and are
more directly concerned with the perceived importance, attractiveness, or usefulness of
achievement activities. (p. 606)

According to Wigfield and Eccles (2000), expectancy value theory posits, “individuals’
choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will
do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity” (p. 68). Expectancy value
theories hold that people are goal-oriented beings (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). According to
Graham et al. (1998), “much of the research on this topic is specific to a particular domain (e.g.,
subject matter domains) and examines whether expectancies and task values predict different
consequences, such as course grades and enrollment decisions, or the extent to which
expectancies and value are negatively or positively correlated” (pp. 607–608). Sociologist have
argued that the “opportunity structure” in American society is structured in a manner that causes
Black people to believe that their efforts will be pointless and unsuccessful in ensuring their
economic success (Graham et al., 1998, p. 608).

**Learned Helplessness and Stereotype Threat**

This notion references the idea of learned helplessness mentioned earlier in relation to
minority groups. Many researchers, in their studies of academic learning theories and motivation
among students, have excluded African American students or marginalized the influence of
cultural differences that can affect the ways in which students learn (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). In
particular, educators may minimize or ignore the discrepancies between the achievement of
minority student and their White counterparts without giving proper attention to the culture of
learning that influences and shapes many African American students. To close the achievement
gap, experts have discussed the importance of student motivation. In the area of educational
psychology and motivation theory, studies involving African American students are limited in
scope and depth. In fact, Graham (1994) described this lack of research on African Americans as “a pattern of neglect undoubtedly reflecting the demise of published research on African Americans in mainstream psychology and educational psychology as a whole” (p. 55).

**Resisting Learned Helplessness and Stereotype Threat**

Sandra Graham is one of the foremost authorities on motivation and African American students and thus has a prominent place in this literature review. Her works center Black students and their specific needs and the catalyst for their educational engagement. Dr. Graham advocates the use of self-determination theory (SDT) as a lens for understanding African American youth (Graham et.al, 1986). Self-determination, as defined by Ryan and Deci (2000), “is focused on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development” (p. 1). One component of SDT focuses on how the social context of the learning environment can play a role in learner motivation (or lack thereof). Relatedness concerns a sense of belonging, connection, and relatability (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggested the following:

SDT posits that satisfaction of the need for relatedness facilitates the process of internalization. People tend to internalize and accept as their own the values and practices of those to whom they feel, or want to feel, connected, and from contexts in which they experience a sense of belonging. (p. 139)

This sense of belonging contributes to the way in which students feel valued and respected, considering the role of race and ethnicity in the learning environment. It explores why people engage or avoid certain activities. Brand et al. discussed the importance of teacher–student relationships in their 2006 study exploring the sociocultural factors that influence student
learning. Brand et al. (2006) found that the fear of negative stereotypes associated with their race heavily influenced the relationships that students had with their teachers:

Students depicted their relationships with teachers in terms of a fear that their teachers’ perceptions of them are in accordance with the negative stereotypes. Within the classroom, students’ relationships with teachers could be best described as “on guard,” a position taken to defend against negative images and beliefs. Although it can be said that all students require validation and acceptance from their teachers, these students seemed to fear their relationships with teachers are further complicated by negative associations. (p. 233)

As noted earlier, educators are wrestling with important questions focused on the development of motivational strategies designed to help close the academic achievement gap between African American students and majority students.

Also important to this investigation is the work of E. Paulette Isaac, who has focused a great deal of her research on African American adult learners within the Black church and considered their environmental context and motivations for learning. Isaac’s work involves understanding the motivations of adult learners who participate in church-based adult education programs, the deterrents of African American adult learners, and the role of the church in education. Her work has centered on the Black church and dissected its role as a motivator, educator, and community partner.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the literature suggests that the Black church plays an influential role in the cross-section between relatedness and motivational theory. The church’s ability to provide its
members with an atmosphere of empowerment, familiarity, and engagement sets the stage for a meaningful and sustainable learning environment, thereby motivating learners to seek additional educational opportunities. Through the informal learning structure of Bible study, church groups, Sunday sermons, and many other church-related activities, participants are exposed to informal education support networks. The support received by African Americans from their “church family” has been deemed an important factor in their church participation and overall well-being. Stolzenberg et al. (1995) suggested that parishioners’ deep feelings of connectedness to their religious institutions are directly tied to their participation in church-sponsored programs and activities. The relationship and support that the Black church fosters with its adult learners, coupled with the learners’ devotion to the church, could serve as a powerful tool for expanding learners’ engagement in higher education. According to the sociocultural theory, the environment of the learner can play a pivotal role in the learning process.

Because the literature on the motivations of African American adults within the Black church was almost nonexistent, with the exception of Isaac et al. (2001), I had to rely on the limited research on African American youth. However, given the increasing numbers of African American learners participating in adult educational activities through community colleges, work-related opportunities, and continued education, further research is merited on the best practices that can be employed when working with this group. It is my belief that motivational influences for African American adult learners, especially with respect to the expectancy value theory, would yield similar results as those reported for African American youth. Because the church plays an influential role in the lives of many African American learners, there is a need to further examine the relationship between the Black church and the African American adult learner.
Research on adult education and the role of the church seems to reveal the strong historical ties to the African American community. What is clearly lacking in the literature, however, is an understanding of the various reasons people choose to participate in church-based adult education programs. In addition, research that examines the motivations of adult learners with respect to their relationship with the Black church is scarce. Overall, the African American adult learner has been grossly overlooked as a constituency group in the realm of adult education and motivation theory (Cokely, 2015). Understanding African American adult learners’ motivations, the importance of social contexts, the institutional orientation of the Black church, and the practical application of adult education principles could serve to enhance the experience of African American adult learners in informal and formal learning environments.

In many instances, adult education has successfully responded to demographic shifts as well as to the changing needs of adult learners. Although many formal higher education institutions have experienced declines in enrollment, community centers and other informal institutions such as the Black church are becoming important venues for community-based adult education (Isaac, 2005). The Black church is seen as a safe, comfortable, and accessible place for learning and community engagement (Isaac, 2005). Learning does not occur in isolation from life’s challenges and circumstances, particularly for the adult learner. The church’s educational programs can serve as a platform to address issues of disparity in the Black community, including healthcare, criminal justice, and general well-being (Isaac, 2005). The Black church will continue to play an important role in adult education and serve as a significant place of learning as its utilization increases. According to Isaac (2005), the Black church is a “natural and fertile ground for research because it provides numerous research possibilities in several areas of adult education and educational psychology” (p. 289).
Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was designed to examine the motivational factors that influence adults to participate in church-based adult education within the Black church. The impetus for this study was based in part on the research conducted by Isaac et al. (2001), who “examined the motivational factors for learning among African American adults in three church-based adult education programs” (p. 23). My study will build on Isaac et al.’s (2001) study by not only examining the current relevance of the motivational dimensions utilized in their original study but also analyzing various subgroups within the context of the church, such as gender and geographic location, related to the motivational dimensions. The motivational dimensions used in the original study by Isaac et al. (2001) included the following: “(a) Familiar Cultural Setting, (b) Spiritual and Religious Development, (c) Love of Learning, (d) Support in Facing Personal Challenges, (e) Family Togetherness, (f) Service to Others, and (g) Social Interaction” (p. 27); these are all connected to sociocultural theory and relatedness. An examination of these factors, coupled with an enhanced understanding of these adult dimensions, could provide valuable insights into how to reach an underserved population within the field of adult education. The creation of programs and spaces that reflect the identities, lived experiences, and cultures of their participants is critical to the retention of African American learners (Sheared, 1999).

Sociocultural Context

Guy (1999) contended that “when people learn about who matters and what’s important in their lives, they can either be empowered or marginalized, depending on their own personal and cultural history” (p. 3). Racial and ethnic groups that do not assimilate to the mainstream culture of the United States are often categorized as marginalized outsiders and are therefore
subjected to discrimination and oppression as consequences of their resistance (Guy, 1999). It is important that higher education institutions provide a culturally relevant space that does not dismiss but rather embraces the realities of African American students’ experiences and culture. The sociocultural approach to learning was first applied by Vygotsky; it focuses on the social context as central to learning and “emphasizes the interdependence of social and individual processes in the construction of knowledge” (Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Steiner and Mahn (1996) stated that sociocultural theory is “based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development” (p. 191). In this study, it was essential to not only focus on the broad perspective of parishioner engagement through surveys but also include individual interviews that provide a richer description of the cultural context’s influence on the learning environment. The social environment is not just a place where learning takes place but is essential to instruction and the learning process. The sociocultural context of the Black church has continued to shape generations of learners through its ongoing resistance to social forces.

It is important to understand that these needs are uniquely met owing to the cultural norms of the church and its ongoing persistence in the Black community. Sawyer (2001) suggested that the culture of the Black church is one that thrives in community engagement and social activism:

The resultant redaction is a Black religious tradition that holds as its ultimate values communalism, the welfare of the collective, the integral relation of the spiritual and the material, and the moral obligation to pursue social-political concretization of the theological principles of equality, justice, and inclusiveness. (p. 67)
The resiliency of the African American spirit continues to be bolstered by the Black church while the U.S. society continues to disenfranchise and limit Black access to basic opportunities and resources widely afforded to other groups. The liberation of Black people related to the Black church is embedded in their cultural toolkit, which reflects their traditions and values. Barnes (2005) referenced these tools by stating the following:

These cultural tools broadly reflect activities to initiate, statements to make, themes to evoke and rituals to perform in order to corral support for action in the Black community. And like earlier efforts, more contemporary studies show that these programs and solutions usually manifest as food and clothing banks, voter registration campaigns and efforts to rally behind political candidates believed to be allied with the Black community, special events to provide wholesome activities for youth, anti-drug and prison ministries. (p. 975)

The support, culture, and environment of the Black church elevate its unique position to serve a population that has historically faced negative stereotypes that influence the community’s treatment and degree of freedom in society. The sociocultural lens relative to the Black church provides a framework based on a cultural ethos distinctive to the African American community.

**Mixed-Methods Design**

This study utilized a mixed-methods design, which is described as a design that “involves combining or integration of a qualitative and quantitative research and data in a research study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 14). Utilization of a mixed-methods approach provides a platform that allows the researchers to benefit from both the methods to get a more holistic picture of the research problem. When used together, both methods complement each other by
working in tandem to provide a fuller, more holistic view of the research study (Creswell, 2003).

In the words of Creswell (2003):

Mixed methods research is “practical” in the sense that the researcher is free to use all methods possible to address a research problem. It is also “practical” because individuals tend to solve problems using both numbers and words; they combine inductive and deductive thinking. (p. 10)

With respect to the quantitative study, the survey was designed to identify the concepts that significantly contributed to adult learners’ motivation for participating in church-based adult education. In contrast, the qualitative interviews were conducted to capture the themes that expanded upon the results of the quantitative study by providing a clearer picture of why parishioners were participating and how their needs were being met. This type of mixed-methods approach is called an explanatory sequential approach, which is defined by Creswell (2007) as a “mixed methods design that involves a two-phase project in which the researcher collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyzes the results, and then uses a qualitative phase to help explain the quantitative results” (p. 74). This approach provided the structure I needed to organize my study.

After obtaining approval to advance my study to the data collection phase from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began data collection in the form of a survey, followed by semi-structured interviews. Information received during the quantitative part of this study was used to select interviewees for the qualitative part of the study.

**Research Questions**

The following three research questions (and sub-questions) were formulated to identify the concepts that significantly contributed to adult learners’ motivation for participating in
church-based adult education. Quantitative data from the survey were collected and analyzed to answer the first research question. Qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed to answer the second and third questions (and sub-questions).

RQ1: Which of the five motivational dimensions: “familiar cultural setting, spiritual and religious development, love of learning, support in facing personal challenges, and family togetherness” (p. 27) identified by Isaac et al. (2001) are the most important factors in church members’ decisions to participate in church-based adult education?

RQ2: How does the environment of the Black church influence its members to expand upon their education?

RQ3: How do Black churches address the social and educational needs of the African American community?

Participants

The participants in this study were members of four participating churches, which were chosen based on “congregation size, location, denomination, and educational offerings” (Isaac et al., 2001, p. 26). Participants for the quantitative study were recruited through flyers placed on bulletin boards, church emails/newsletters, and church announcements during weekday/weekend services. After receiving IRB approval, I identified a list of churches that fit the criteria mentioned above and began contacting the church leadership through phone calls and emails. Once I had favorable responses from a variety of churches within my framework, I secured a commitment from each church through email communication. I set up in-person and phone meetings with church leadership to discuss the study, set up survey distribution times and dates, and answered any questions regarding my research. For three of the churches selected, I was able to attend various programs, including bible studies, leadership programs, and seminars in person.
to administer the surveys. I attended selected programs over the course of 1–3 weeks to distribute my threshold of 200 surveys but was able to collect 250 responses. Because I was unable to attend programs in one of the selected churches to distribute surveys in person owing to inclement weather and program cancellations, I mailed the surveys, along with several large envelopes with prepaid postage and a return address for ease of return, to the church leadership. The surveys were distributed and collected over the course of a month. The surveys were then mailed back to me in the envelopes provided in the initial mail.

Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the churches and the number of participants who participated in this study. Participants were required to be 18 years or older and have participated in at least one of their church’s educational programs or activities. Two hundred and fifty participants were included in the final analysis of the quantitative part of the study. The number of surveys, 250, was determined to be significant based on Isaac et al.’s original study, which utilized 330 surveys in the final analysis, and was approximately 70% of the original study response rate. Sixteen participants were included in the final analysis of the qualitative study. Table 3.1 is the interview subject profile which provides demographic information on each participant, including their race, age, and gender.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Number</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>No. of Members</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 3.1**

*Interview Subject Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Subject Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Church Denomination/Affiliation</th>
<th>Approximate Church Size</th>
<th>Length of Interview (min)</th>
<th>Leadership Role (optional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black/Brazilian</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>Does not currently attend</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Usher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Minister of Music Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>African American/African American/Caribbean descent African American</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>African American/African American</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>African American/African American</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Pentecostal/Holiness</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Drama/Arts Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Prophet/Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic Characteristics of Participating Churches

Given the purpose of this study, it was essential to identify a range of African American churches in order to capture a broad representative population. Church location was noted by applying the tag of rural or urban. Table 3.3 provides an overview of the churches that provide educational offerings. The first church (Church 1) is predominantly an African American Baptist church in Richmond, Virginia, with a membership of approximately 15,000 individuals. The church is located in a recently gentrified environment, has close proximity to an affluent suburban environment, and is equidistant to an area overcome with poverty. Table 3.3 provides an outline of how they structure their educational programs by life stages. The educational programs and activities at this church are structured by life stage to group members together based on their ages, and subsequently their development levels, with the intention of better meeting the needs of and enhancing the services offered to these groups. The life stages of this church (myspbc.org) are as follows:

Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Life Stage</th>
<th>Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant–10</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–19</td>
<td>Surge, Merge, Blueprint (SMB)</td>
<td>Purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>Dreamchasers</td>
<td>Orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Aspire</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Fusion</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>Encore</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>Primetime</td>
<td>Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>Refiners</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second church (Church 2) is a medium-sized Baptist church located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Harrisburg is the capital city of Pennsylvania and thus representative of an urban community. The membership at this church comprises approximately 550 individuals. This church has a long history dating back over 150 years and is located in close proximity to the downtown area. This was the only church in the study that was led by a female pastor. The third
church (Church 3) is a small church located in Altoona, Pennsylvania, which for the purposes of this study is considered a rural church; its membership is approximately 100 people. This church has a long history in the Altoona community and dates back 80 years, but it lost many of its members when the former pastor retired. During data collections the church was in the process of reviving its membership and actively seeking younger members by collaborating with the surrounding college campus. The fourth church (Church 4) is Pentecostal in denomination, which closely follows the Baptist church in the overall number of African American participants. This is a small church located in southwestern Virginia, nestled in a rural, mountainous area that features a small-town environment. The membership is approximately 75 members, with a large percentage of members being affiliated with the local university as either staff or students (a transient population).

**Table 3.3**

*Church Education Programs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Area Type</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Educational Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Richmond, VA</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>Leadership development conferences, GED classes, health and wellness clinics, retirement planning classes, Bible study (various classes offered in this field), leadership development institute (with certification offered), study abroad opportunities, job development skills workshops, public speaking workshops, dance ministry, mime ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Harrisburg, PA</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Women’s leadership series, Black History Month-related events, Bible study class, new members class, GED prep classes, leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quantitative Instrument

The African American experience in the United States has been plagued by historical inequalities across a wide range of factors, including resources, access, and social barriers and a lack of educational opportunities. Much of the research on the participation of adults in educational programs has been focused on White, middle-class audiences who participated in traditional degree programs (Isaac et al., 2001). Considering the omission of this key audience, in this study, it was important to utilize an instrument developed with a primary focus on the African American community. In addition, the instrument needed to take into account a variety of socioeconomic and educational levels, which is better reflective of the audience I surveyed. These factors persist and result in achievement discrepancies (Isaac et al., 2001). To address these factors, I employed a scale redesigned by Isaac et al. (2001) that attempts to be better reflective and culturally sensitive to the surveyed audience. Service to others and social interaction were removed from this survey because of the lack of literature supporting them as relevant factors for my target audience. The five motivational factors identified in this analysis are as follows: (a) familiar cultural setting, (b) spiritual and religious development, (c) love of learning, (d) support in facing personal challenges, and (e) family togetherness (Isaac et al.,
Table 3.4 lists these five motivational factors (Isaac et al., 2001, p. 28) and describes each factor.

**Table 3.4**

*Five Motivational Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar Cultural Setting</td>
<td>Represents the motivations of adults who participated because they could be around other Christians and, in particular, African Americans whose lifestyles (i.e., Christian), beliefs, and values were similar to theirs. This factor refers to a sense of comfort among participants brought about by being members of the Black church or community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual and Religious Development</td>
<td>Represents the motivations of adults who participated in church-based educational programs because they wanted to develop spiritually and enhance their relationship with God. They also wanted to learn more about their religious beliefs and become better Christians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>Describes the motivations of African American adults who participated because they valued learning and found it exciting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in Facing Personal Challenges</td>
<td>Adults motivated by this factor seek assistance in coping or dealing with problems in their lives. Personal challenges included life events such as family death and economic hardships as well as more idiosyncratic life events such as ethical dilemmas or hospitalization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Togetherness</td>
<td>Refers to sharing in educational activities with family members or significant others. In relation to this factor, the term <em>family</em> is not limited to its traditional meaning of a nuclear family (i.e., mother, father, and children). Rather, it refers to extended family as well as persons with whom an individual feels a close personal relationship, such as a romantic companion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5 presents the scales used in the Isaac et al. (2001) study and the corresponding questions designed to measure the concepts in the survey. Appendix A includes a copy of the survey distributed to the participants.

**Table 3.5**

*Scales (Isaac et al., 2001)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Survey Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar Cultural Setting</td>
<td>People are more accepting of me&lt;br&gt;Feel more comfortable asking questions&lt;br&gt;Interact with other Black people&lt;br&gt;Feel more comfortable participating in discussions&lt;br&gt;Prefer the church to other educational settings&lt;br&gt;More comfortable because more Black people are there&lt;br&gt;Gives me something to do with other Christians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gives me something to do with people like me
Familiar with people at church
Gives me something to do with people who have lifestyles similar to mine
Because it is held in the Black community
To see my friends
Gives me something useful to do
Other people I respect are participating

| Spiritual and Religious Development | Learn more about God
|                                | Learn more about my relationship with God
|                                | Makes me feel closer to God
|                                | To be a better Christian
|                                | Learn more about the Bible
|                                | It is part of my duty to God
|                                | Pastor emphasized the importance of education
|                                | Like the Christian perspective of the course
|                                | Classes will help me to live better

| Love of Learning | Learning is exciting for me
|                  | To gain knowledge
|                  | Learn something new
|                  | Value learning
|                  | Enhance knowledge about a particular subject
|                  | To develop skills
|                  | It is a good source of information
|                  | To be a knowledgeable person
|                  | Achieve a specific personal goal

| Support in Facing Personal Challenges | Find ways to overcome personal challenges
|                                       | Get an encouraging word while going through a trial
|                                       | Get emotional support
|                                       | Learn survival skills
|                                       | Fulfill a need in life
|                                       | Help with a situation at home
|                                       | Help with personal life
|                                       | Meet people who are facing problems similar to mine

| Family Togetherness | Family is participating
|                    | Kids can participate in activities
|                    | Share in activities with a spouse or a significant other

**Purposeful Sampling**

Purposeful sampling was used in this study to obtain qualitative data. As Creswell (2007) noted, this approach is useful for selecting a diverse group of individuals who can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Creswell (2012) suggested that in qualitative research, “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 206). The researcher must decide who will be selected as participants in the study but should be flexible to change as the need for it arises. In qualitative research, the goal is to obtain in-depth, detailed information about the participants for the quality of the study.
Qualitative Interviews

Background

The study participants comprised 16 parishioners from churches that ranged from 15 to 10,000 in congregation size. The participants were 33–57 years old and included 10 females and 6 males. On average, most participants had a longstanding relationship with the church and had attended church since they were in elementary school. One participant reported that they no longer attend church owing to a change in beliefs; fifteen participants still actively attend church. Leadership roles varied amongst the participants: three identified as pastors, two as ministers, one as choir leader, one as an usher, and one as a drama/arts teacher. Participants’ responses often overlapped across themes; in such situations, the interview data were applied to the most relevant theme.

Since this is a mixed-methods study, I purposefully selected a small subset of participants who participated in the quantitative phase of this study to provide qualitative data. At the end of the quantitative instrument, I included a series of open-ended questions intended to augment the statistical data with qualitative contextual information. The information obtained from the open-ended questions provided an opportunity to gain a more holistic picture of my current research. The open-ended questions that were employed are listed below:

1. Has participating in your church’s educational programs or activities affected your feelings about seeking more educational opportunities outside the church (such as enrolling in a college, a certificate program, and professional development courses)?
   a. No: Please continue to the next question.
   b. Yes: Please describe how it has affected your feelings.
2. Has participating in your church’s programs or activities encouraged you to **participate in more** educational programs or activities **outside the church** (such as enrolling in a college, a certificate program, and professional development courses)?

   a. No: Please continue to the next question.

   b. Yes: Please list the educational programs or activities.

3. What are some aspects of the church’s programs or activities that have attracted you to participate in them?

   The most appropriate method for collecting the information needed to enhance this study is to conduct individual interviews with a selected group of original study participants, including pastoral leadership. Creswell (2007) discussed the importance of selecting suitable candidates during the interview stage. According to Patton (2002 p. 238), “criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” to provide a richer and deeper framework of understanding. The criteria used to select participants for this study included the following:

   1. Participants who participated in educational programs sponsored by the church

   2. African American–identified participants who attended predominantly Black churches, and

   3. Participants who held leadership positions in the church.

   After considering the limited time availability of participants and the relatively in-depth information required from the interviewees chosen from the quantitative study in relation to the literature, a sample size of 16 interviews, ranging between 10 and 45 min, was deemed appropriate. The interviews took place in person or via phone, based on the location and availability of the participants.
Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

In their study, Isaac et al. (2001) “set the criterion level for factor loading at .475 and of the 65 items, 15 failed to load on any factor at the criterion level” (pp. 27–28). Seven additional items were deleted from my survey in an effort to equalize the number of measures in relation to the seven motivational dimensions for participation and to make the survey more time-efficient. Due to these eliminations, the seven original dimensions were reduced to five dimensions. The final survey (see Appendix A) included 43 items that were scored on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree), and 4 (strongly agree). To obtain quantitative data findings, the critical level for statistical significance (α) was set at .05 for reporting purposes.

To determine whether differences existed between genders and place (urban or rural), a two-way ANOVA included both of these variables, which is a more appropriate statistical test than two separate, independent sample t-tests. A two-way ANOVA was conducted for RQ1, after which 5 two-way ANOVAs (one for each dimension) were employed to address RQ2 and RQ3. In summary, two-way ANOVA tests are best utilized when an experiment is designed to measure two different factors or when one wishes to simultaneously test two factors. To determine the reliability of the scales, I calculated the Cronbach’s alpha scores for each scale. According to Tavakol et al. (2012, the alpha was:

developed by Lee Cronbach in 1951 to provide a measure of the internal consistency of a test or scale; it is expressed as a number between 0 and 1. Internal consistency describes the extent to which all the items in a test measure the same concept or construct and hence it is connected to the inter-relatedness of the items within the test. Internal
consistency should be determined before a test can be employed for research or examination purposes to ensure validity. (p. 53)

Scales that have an alpha score above .60 will be deemed acceptable for the purpose of this study.

**Qualitative Analysis**

The participants’ responses were categorized and organized into themes. Interview data were analyzed to search for emerging patterns. In the data analysis process, first, a list of themes and codes was generated to provide evidence reflective of broader perspectives (Mertens, 2005). Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis, which involved an initial inductive analysis of themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through multiple reviews over three rounds of coding of the initial interviews, categories and subcategories were constructed as the data were revisited. Patterns emerged during the initial analysis of the participants’ responses that resulted in further coding and categorization. When searching for patterns in coded data to categorize them, sometimes, things may be grouped together not just because they are exactly alike or very much alike but because they might also have something in common, and commonality consists of differences (Saldana, 2009). The categories provided grouping that captured the core of the participants’ responses. Credibility was established through the systematic analysis of the data. Using a recursive process, statements from the participants were analyzed and organized into subsequent themes based on their relevance.

Coding is the process of providing detailed descriptions, meanings, and themes as a means for interpreting the data as the researcher (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), “the process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of
information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184).

Data-driven coding is when you can look for concepts in the text without a prescribed concept of categories and let the text speak for itself (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, I utilized data-driven coding by allowing the categories to emerge from my interviews. I read the transcripts in their entirety numerous times to immerse myself in the details and obtain an overall understanding of the interviews. Once I received the fully transcribed transcripts, I performed line-by-line coding of each document. I repeated this process two additional times, allowing for a minimum of at least 12 hours to pass before rereading each document to allow for a fresher approach to the data. Some topics and content appeared frequently, and I took notes on each line by assigning numbers to each pattern. In addition, I used color-coding to highlight the broader categories as they emerged from the process. Following the initial coding, I continued to reduce the number of codes and themes that arose across transcripts. As I continued analyzing the data, new codes emerged that allowed me to desegregate the data into more succinct themes. Multiple themes were organized under broader themes; for example, fear/embarrassment and culture/environment were organized under the theme of “the Black church as a safe space.”

Table 3.6 presents the overall themes that emerged from the coding process at the conclusion of three separate readings. These themes were eventually condensed further to provide a more concise understanding of the data. Data saturation was determined to be reached when no new information or themes emerged. According to Brod et al. (2009), “previous research has found that after twelve interviews, between 88 and 92% of analysis codes (themes) can be identified” (p. 1268). Based on my judgement, field notes, transcripts, and interviews, I concluded that saturation had been reached when no new information emerged (Brod et al., 2009).
In this study, I used semi-structured interviews to not only ask the fundamental questions relevant to the study but also pursue the additional information revealed during the interviews. This process allowed me to ask additional questions to get a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon. Galletta (2013) defined the semi-structured interview as a process that allows: accommodation to a range of research goals, typically reflects variation in its use of questions, prompts, and accompanying tools and resources to draw the participant more fully into the topic under study. Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research. (p. 45).

According to Creswell (2007), “the next step consists of moving from the reading and memoing in the spiral to describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. In this loop, forming codes or categories represents the heart of qualitative data analysis” (p. 184). The amount of data revealed in a qualitative study can be quite expansive; therefore, it was important to utilize data management to organize the information (Creswell, 2007). Initially, I organized my files in file folders ordered by each interview participant’s name. Each interview was audio recorded and consent was received from each participant prior to the interview. After each interview, the interviews were transcribed. In each file folder, I had, at minimum, four identical copies of each interview, which I used for field notes, coding, and re-coding. Later in the process, I utilized a computer program entitled Dedoose to assist in organizing my data and storing transcripts. I leveraged many of the features available in the Dedoose software, such as projects, memos, descriptors, excerpts, and codes. Creswell (2007) discussed that one of the advantages of using computer programs is that they provide an organized storage file system that is easily accessible
by the researcher. Using Dedoose I was able to finalize the themes that emerged from the data. Table 3.7 highlights the final categories, relevant literature and contributing categories based on the data analysis.

I further explored the literature to guide me in developing the final four themes. The final themes that emerged from the coding are listed below, and in Table 3.6 are the coding categories and descriptions. The themes below will be further discussed in Chapter 4:

1. The Black church shielded learners from negative identity association,
2. Advocacy from the Black church was considered significant to learner engagement,
3. Trust in the educational spaces contributed to the learners’ success,
4. Culturally relevant learning spaces positively influenced learner engagement

Table 3.6

Coding Categories and Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Categories</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>• Pastor’s encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceptions of leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership including those perceived to be in leadership positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership valuing education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encouraging educational programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>• Did programs cost money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Were other resources provided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Comparison of secular programs/services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/Environment</td>
<td>• The feeling of the church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Authentic programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Feeling empowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Racial identity celebrated and affirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear/Embarrassment</td>
<td>• Past failures in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of education/degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not sounding “educated”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>• Care from other members or programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Services offered to fill other life gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Models</td>
<td>• People who provide a positive influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professionals in a variety of careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• After-school program leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentoring programs (informal and formal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Faith in Learning</td>
<td>• Combining faith and Bible teachings to enhance learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education/Programming</td>
<td>• Programs offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Variety of programs offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborations with other agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trust
- Feeling valued in racial identity by the church
- Feelings of familiarity
- Not concerned with being taken advantage of
- Vested in the church
- Comfortable
- Family-oriented feelings
- Feeling empowered

Table 3.7

Final Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Contributing Secondary Categories</th>
<th>Related Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with church leadership were considered significant to learner engagement</td>
<td>1. Trust 2. Education/Programs 3. Leadership 4. Role of Faith in Learning</td>
<td>Barnes, 2005; Isaac &amp; Rowland, 2002; Mitchell, 1995; Taylor et al., 2001.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Role of the Researcher

I am an African American female administrator who worked at a large urban university in Virginia at the time of this study. I grew up attending church services, summer programs, vacation Bible school, etc. and have been in the Black church for most of my life. I currently attend a church that is considered a Black church based on its denomination and congregational make-up. Being a long-term church member has strongly influenced my desire to explore partnerships that involve the church and higher education. As a woman and mother, it is my desire to see the church play an enhanced role in preparing our youth to navigate a complicated educational system that is not inherently designed for their success. More specifically, I have a passion for ensuring that young girls are not left out of consideration in terms of resources, mentoring, and assistance. I have a young daughter who has faced numerous challenges in the
educational system, and I understand the importance of being an informed advocate/parent for one’s child. This kind of advocacy and information is something I strongly feel should be a part of a village approach that includes the church and other community partners. However, I recognize that my history and relationship with the Black church presents an opportunity for bias. I would add that the same could be said concerning my identity as a Black woman regarding the role of racism, particularly in the educational system.

Although I bring these salient identities into this study, the benefits of this study outweigh the risk of my involvement. Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) state that “historically, the church, the family, and the school are the three most critical institutions whose interactions have been responsible for the viability of the African American community” (p. 427). I believe the church has provided resources for its members to be successful in their academic endeavors in addition to their spiritual health. The purpose of this study was to examine how the church motivates its members to participate in adult education programs sponsored by the Black church and how the church is meeting the needs of its learners.

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell (2007), “ethical issues should be grouped by informed consent procedures; deceptions or covert activities; confidentiality towards participants, sponsors, and colleagues; benefits of research to participants over risks; and participant requests that go beyond social norms” (p. 41). The procedures set forth by the IRB ensured that all participants provided their signed consent prior to conducting the interviews. The privacy of the churches and participants was secured by assigning them both a pseudonym and a participant number. All the participation risks with the associated study (which were expected to be minimal) were clearly
listed in the informed consent document. Participants could withdraw at any time and for any reason. My behavior abided by all federal, state, and local laws as well as by the churches’ policies and guidelines. As described by Creswell (2007), “regardless of the approach there are ethical issues that can arise during the data collection process, analysis, and distribution of qualitative data” (p. 174). By following all IRB guidelines and reflecting appropriate standards, I ensured that all ethical considerations for this study were considered and followed to the letter. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the results of the qualitative and quantitative data analyses.
Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

In this chapter I will be reporting on the findings from the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. I will revisit the research questions from Chapter 3 and discuss my findings, results, and conclusions in relation to the motivational dimensions from the quantitative survey and the four themes from the qualitative interviews. The motivational dimensions used in this study included the following: “(a) Familiar Cultural Setting, (b) Spiritual and Religious Development, (c) Love of Learning, (d) Support in Facing Personal Challenges, (e) Family Togetherness” (Isaac et al., 2001). The qualitative data is organized by the themes that developed through the data analysis which are as follows:

1. The Black church shielded learners from negative identity associations.
2. Advocacy from the Black church was considered significant to learner engagement.
3. Trust in the educational spaces contributed to the learners’ success.

Quantitative Findings

Research Question

RQ1: Which of the five motivational dimensions identified by Isaac et al. (2001) are the most important factors in church members’ decisions to participate in church-based adult education?
Comparison of Motivational Factors

The five motivational factors that framed this study are outlined in Table 4. In addressing the first research question, data for the entire sample were analyzed to determine if any significant differences existed among the scales of motivational factors. Two significant interactions were identified between location and gender for familiar cultural setting and family togetherness. In addition, spiritual and religious development (SRD), love of learning, and support in facing personal challenges had the highest means (Table 4). Table 4.1 below defines the motivational dimensions based on their corresponding factor number.

Table 4

Description of Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Corresponding Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar Cultural Setting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual and Religious Development</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in Facing Personal Challenges</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Togetherness</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 presents the scale factors aligned to corresponding factor numbers. Factors will be interchangeably referred to by their factor numbers in the following paragraphs.

Table 4.1

Cronbach’s Alpha

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar Cultural Setting</td>
<td>.902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual and Religious Development</td>
<td>.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in Facing Personal Challenges</td>
<td>.814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Togetherness</td>
<td>.796</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 presents the Cronbach’s alpha scores for the factors used to frame this study. Cronbach’s alpha is a measure of internal consistency—that is, how closely related is a set of items as a group. According to Tavakol et al. (2012), “there are different reports about the
acceptable values of alpha, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95. A low value of alpha could be due to a low number of questions, poor interrelatedness between items or heterogeneous constructs” (p. 54). Each factor in this study has a Cronbach’s alpha score of greater than .70.

The three factors with the highest means were spiritual and religious development (3.848), support in facing personal challenges (3.693), and love of learning (3.097) (see Table 4.2 Estimated Marginal Means). Spiritual growth, as related to SRD, is an influential and intimate factor for many African Americans. Taking into consideration the social context of the Black church in this study, this finding is consistent with previous research on religious education. SRD within the Black church is fostered not only through the Sunday sermons and weekly Bible studies but also through the supplemental adult religious education activities. SRD is highly emphasized in many churches through new member orientations and ongoing programmatic efforts. The relevance of this factor is not particularly surprising considering the context of this study that is rooted in religious influence. The Black church has played a significant role in influencing its members to feel empowered to continue their education.

Table 4.2

Estimated Marginal Means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
<th>Lower Bound</th>
<th>Upper Bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 FCS</td>
<td>2.678</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>2.601</td>
<td>2.755</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SRD</td>
<td>3.848</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>3.776</td>
<td>3.921</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 LOL</td>
<td>3.097</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>3.037</td>
<td>3.156</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 SPC</td>
<td>3.693</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>3.600</td>
<td>3.785</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 FT</td>
<td>2.861</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>2.744</td>
<td>2.979</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. All means are significantly different from each other. Bonferroni correction is strict; therefore, there is no inflated type 1 error rate (familywise error rate is maintained at an acceptable 5% level).

Support in facing personal challenges had the second highest mean value, indicating its considerable influence on adult learners’ motivation for participating in adult education activities in the Black church. Parishioners often seek guidance through their engagement with the church. Prayer is often used as a tool to cope with life’s struggles and challenges and is heavily relied on in the African American community as a catalyst for change. Mattis et al. (2017, p. 2) suggested that “religion also informs the meanings that people construct about the events that befall them,” implying that if the meaning was associated with God’s plan, then the resolution would also be rooted in that plan. This reconciliation of faith for many African Americans is a fundamental anchor that provides a blueprint for enduring and solving problems. For example, Nelson (1997) said, “While some might attribute being laid off or breaking the good china simply to ‘bad luck’ or to the operation of impersonal social or natural forces, to the religious mind there is always the possibility of a spiritual interpretation” (p. 5). For African Americans, their spirituality is firmly rooted in the word of God and their faith, and they heavily rely on that faith especially during difficult times.

Religious coping methods include seeking spiritual support, collaborative religious coping, and spiritual connection. In her article, Mellowes (2020) referenced Professor Jonathan Walters’ quote that “for more than 300 years, the black church in America has provided a safe haven for black Christians in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class” (The Next Chapter section, para. 41). According to Thomas (2016), Black women in particular have had a complex and complicated history with the Black
church. Thomas (2016, p. 2) stated, “Women, making up 70 to 90 percent of black congregations, have always found the institution of the church a place of refuge, of solace and hope.” Black women more frequently attend church compared to Black men, participate in more church-related activities, and tend to have a more sustained and long-term commitment to the Black church (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Undoubtedly, the Black church in its role as an extended family serves as an informal support network to help those facing personal challenges in life. Oftentimes, the personal challenges faced by the members of the Black church can be traced back to financial woes, disparities in health, unemployment, lack of access to higher education, racial bias, and structural racism.

Love of learning, the factor with the third highest influence on adult learners’ motivation for participation, is primarily the intrinsic value individuals have placed on learning (Isaac et al., 2001). This factor rated the motivations of African American adults who found learning exciting and enjoyed continuing their education (Isaac et al., 2001). This connects with a cognitive interest principle of motivating adult learners described by Lieb (1991, p. 3) as “to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind.” This factor is rooted in the desire to learn and gain personal edification in the context of the church, and for many that desire probably exists in other spaces because it is intrinsically driven. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined intrinsic motivation as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70).

Although familiar cultural setting and family togetherness had the lowest means, certain contextual factors may have influenced these findings. In the case of urban adult learners, for example, although familiar cultural setting was not found to be a significant factor for motivation, it is likely that these participants have not felt a personal connection within the
“mega church” environment. If the environment did not provide a sense of belonging owing to its size, this would impact the subsequent findings. A mega church is an institution with 2,000 or more individuals attending a typical weekly service. The familiar cultural setting factor may have not taken into consideration that a member may have a connection with a charismatic pastor and not with the overall congregation. Barnes (2015) noted, “Black megachurches are increasingly known for their charismatic pastors, multiple worship services, and unconventional programs” (p. 115). Mega churches may have multiple methods or ways in which people can participate in their services, such as online streaming, Facebook live, and on-demand recordings. In these cases, the members may not be as attracted to the cultural setting as they may be to the sermons, pastor, and accessibility of the word. In the case of rural learners, this factor may have become skewed through the ongoing associations of members and family networks that consistently interact on a level outside of the church. Therefore, the actual “physical structure” of the church may not be very important to them because the members are people they more frequently have fellowship with due to the size of the church and their familiarity with other members. These fictive kin relationships tend to be stronger in small churches and oftentimes are related to the intimacy of the members with one another.

According to Trochim (2020, para. 2), “Descriptive statistics help us to simplify large amounts of data in a sensible way. Each descriptive statistic reduces lots of data into a simpler summary.” The descriptive statistics in the context of interaction between gender and setting for familiar cultural setting (rural and urban settings) is outlined in Table 4.3. Gender and place were significant factors in the familiar cultural setting (significance level of .724; Table 4.4 Although familiar cultural setting alone was not a significant factor among the five motivational factors, gender significance provides a critical lens in which to view this element. Familiar cultural
setting was found to have a significant influence on women’s motivation to participate in church-based adult education. Location (rural or urban) was not found to be significant when isolated in the framework of familiar cultural setting.

**Table 4.3**

*Descriptive Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable: FCS</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Male</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>42.5714</td>
<td>4.75094</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>40.6316</td>
<td>9.13686</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.1538</td>
<td>8.18987</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Female</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>40.9362</td>
<td>7.07231</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>39.9579</td>
<td>7.41034</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40.2817</td>
<td>7.28972</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>41.3115</td>
<td>6.61196</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>40.1504</td>
<td>7.91192</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40.5155</td>
<td>7.52972</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .009 (Adjusted R Squared = −.007)

**Table 4.4**

*FCS * Gender and Place*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>97.543*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32.514</td>
<td>.570</td>
<td>.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>207861.182</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>207861.182</td>
<td>3641.674</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>41.153</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41.153</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>.397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>65.732</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>65.732</td>
<td>1.152</td>
<td>.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Place</td>
<td>7.137</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.137</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>10844.911</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>57.078</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>329394.000</td>
<td>194</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>10942.454</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SRD was determined to be a significant factor among all the motivational factors shown in Table 4.2. Table 4.5 presents the descriptive statistics for SRD. Gender and place were not found to have significance at the .037 level. Table 4.6 outlines the descriptive statistics for SRD by gender and location. African Americans religious and spiritual development practices have a rich and complicated history that has evolved within the context of societal influences such as systemic racism, political oppression, and gender inequality (Taylor et al., 2014). These religious practices responded to the adverse conditions of African Americans while edifying their spiritual development within the Black church (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). According to Pattillo-McCoy (1998, p. 770), “Black Christian spirituality is based on themes of deliverance and freedom.” SRD for many African Americans has served as a survival resource and coping mechanism. Barnes (2015), regarding the liberation theory utilized in the Black church, stated that “Liberation theologies center on the lives and experiences of historically disenfranchised and devalued groups. They seek to change the beliefs and behavior of the oppressed to promote individual and collective empowerment and social action, while simultaneously challenging persons and groups that are directly and/or indirectly involved in the oppression of others” (p. 117). The liberation Barnes (2015) refers to has been key to empowering Black people to see beyond their circumstances and to heavily rely on their faith and change their mindsets even when the environment does not necessarily change.

**Table 4.5**

*Descriptive SRD*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Male</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>32.5000</td>
<td>3.26599</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>34.9259</td>
<td>3.74091</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.3714</td>
<td>3.75778</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6

**SRD* Gender and Place**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>84.383*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28.128</td>
<td>1.521</td>
<td>.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>166605.538</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>166605.538</td>
<td>9008.835</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>26.132</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.132</td>
<td>1.413</td>
<td>.236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>29.879</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29.879</td>
<td>1.616</td>
<td>.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Place</td>
<td>81.642</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.642</td>
<td>4.415</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>4179.547</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>18.494</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>276712.000</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>4263.930</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .020 (Adjusted R Squared = .007)

Table 4.7 outlines the descriptive statistics for love of learning by gender and place.

Gender and place were not found to be significant (.046) for this factor, as identified in Table 4.8. This factor may not have showed up as statistically significant owing to the idea of “learning” being more closely aligned with traditional school systems and methods. The association of learning in the Black church may be more strongly associated with spiritual development and seen as a necessity in their life rather than as a method of learning and enhancing their knowledge. Although learning new things might have a residual influence, it very well may be superseded by learning as a tool to navigate life’s trials and tribulations rather than as an enhancement. In addition, much of the learning among church members is rooted in
text, the Bible, which they have been reading all their lives, and they do not see the learning as something “new.”

Table 4.7

Descriptive LOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Male</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>26.5294</td>
<td>2.83103</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>28.2586</td>
<td>2.72455</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.8667</td>
<td>2.82524</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Female</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>28.3191</td>
<td>2.98625</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>27.7881</td>
<td>4.00822</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.9394</td>
<td>3.74442</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>27.8438</td>
<td>3.03011</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>27.9432</td>
<td>3.63431</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.9167</td>
<td>3.47756</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.8

LOL * Gender and Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>49.061*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.354</td>
<td>1.358</td>
<td>.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>116218.360</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>116218.360</td>
<td>9653.258</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>16.448</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.448</td>
<td>1.366</td>
<td>.244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>13.568</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.568</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>.290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Place</td>
<td>48.278</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48.278</td>
<td>4.010</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>2841.272</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>12.039</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>189932.000</td>
<td>240</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>2890.333</td>
<td>239</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .017 (Adjusted R Squared = .004)

Table 4.9 displays the descriptive statistics for support in facing personal challenges.

Table 4.10 shows that gender and place were not significant for this factor. The factor was found
to be significant among all the motivational dimensions. The resilience of Black people has historically been influenced by many factors, with the Black church serving as a source of strength to face life’s hardships and challenges. Regarding the Black church, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) stated, “Churches provide social and economic support by meeting emergency needs, providing a network of friends for emotional and physical well-being, and attending to families’ special needs” (p. 770). The fact that the Black church as born out of the oppression and unimaginable suffering of Black people, it comes as no surprise that the church continues to be a space for its members who continue to face the residual impact of systemic racism and other intersectional issues. Speakes-Lewis et al. (2011) discussed the formation of the Black church in the following quote: “Formed first by enslaved Africans out of their collective sufferings in a slaveholding society, the formative role of church was to offer refuge and shelter from a dehumanizing world experience” (p. 236). Black churches have stood in the gap by providing a space for politics, arts, education, and social services when African Americans were excluded from participating in mainstream America while also being denied the opportunity to build their own institutions (Calhoun-Brown, 2000). The evolution of personal challenges for Black people has shifted and changed in many instances, but the role of the Black church has remained as a strong influence and resource in the Black community.

Table 4.9

Descriptive SPC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>25.100</td>
<td>3.53777</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25.9275</td>
<td>4.01585</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.7416</td>
<td>3.90957</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>26.1951</td>
<td>3.71631</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25.9223</td>
<td>4.53027</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10

\( SPC \times Gender \text{ and Place} \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>16.474(^a)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.491</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>107908.524</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>107908.524</td>
<td>6208.409</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>12.049</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.049</td>
<td>.693</td>
<td>.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>3.121</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.121</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (*) Place</td>
<td>12.280</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.280</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td>.401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>3980.255</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>17.381</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>160311.000</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>3996.730</td>
<td>232</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) R Squared = .004 (Adjusted R Squared = -.009)

Table 4.11 displays the descriptive statistics for family togetherness, and Table 4.12 shows that gender and place are significant at the .833 level. Family togetherness had an important influence on both men and women in terms of their motivation to participate in church-based adult education. Location was significant at the .767 level when isolated from gender. Family togetherness relative to the Black church has historically served as a factor for involvement. Billingsley and Caldwell (1991), in their article, quoted Hill in the following text: “Hill (1971) explains, African American families are sustained by five major sources of strength including, notably, a strong religious orientation, flexibility of family roles, and a strong achievement orientation. Despite the strains on contemporary families these strengths remain evident” (p. 428). Family togetherness has long been a tenet held in the Black church, and it can
be seen in the church’s programs, outreach, and ministries. The Black family has served as the nucleus of the Black church and can be seen in the extension of fictive family roles that have been embraced by and have bonded church members together throughout history.

**Table 4.11**

*Descriptive FT*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Male</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.8667</td>
<td>2.23180</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.8302</td>
<td>2.35123</td>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.8382</td>
<td>2.30904</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.6170</td>
<td>2.43662</td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.4000</td>
<td>2.64509</td>
<td></td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.4630</td>
<td>2.58072</td>
<td></td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.6774</td>
<td>2.37317</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.5357</td>
<td>2.55688</td>
<td></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.5739</td>
<td>2.50436</td>
<td></td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rural</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.6774</td>
<td>2.37317</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Urban</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.5357</td>
<td>2.55688</td>
<td></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.5739</td>
<td>2.50436</td>
<td></td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.12**

*FT * Gender and Place*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corrected Model</strong></td>
<td>8.332a</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.777</td>
<td>.440</td>
<td>.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>10432.744</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10432.744</td>
<td>1651.223</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>4.001</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.001</td>
<td>.633</td>
<td>.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>.556</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.556</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Place</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>1427.911</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>6.318</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>18344.000</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corrected Total</strong></td>
<td>1436.243</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. R Squared = .006 (Adjusted R Squared = -.007)

**Qualitative Findings**

This study aimed to examine the influence of the Black church as a catalyst for motivating adult parishioners to continue education. During in-depth interviews, study...
participants described their perceptions and experiences in the context of adult education in the church. They also discussed the ways in which the church differed from secular educational institutions. The research findings examined in this section are based on the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The interview subject profile is included for reference below in table 4.13.

**Table 4.13**

*Interview Subject Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Subject Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Church Denomination/Affiliation</th>
<th>Approximate Church Size</th>
<th>Length of Interview (min)</th>
<th>Leadership Role (optional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Independent</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black/Brazilian</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>Does not currently attend 2000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Usher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Minister of Music Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>African American/Caribbean</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Pentecostal/Pentecostal/Holiness</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Drama/Arts Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Non-Denominational Baptist</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Prophet/Minister</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

The qualitative section of this study explored the role of the Black church’s educational programs and the perceptions of its parishioners on whether the programs have played a role in their continued education. This study focused around two central research questions:

RQ2: How does the environment of the Black church influence its members to expand upon their education?

RQ3: How do Black churches address the social and educational needs of the African American community?

These research questions were developed to address the question of “why” related to participants’ motivations—that was identified in the quantitative part of the study. To obtain a fuller picture based on a more in-depth analysis of the motivational factors, it was important to broaden the scope of the study to include qualitative data. In particular, the research questions are used to identify what strategies or best practices are being utilized by the Black church to engage its learners. The following themes that emerged are consistent with the literature and are in line with the research questions:

1. The Black church shielded learners from negative identity associations.
2. Advocacy from the Black church was considered significant to learner engagement.
3. Trust in the educational spaces contributed to the learners’ success.

The Black Church Shielded Learners from Negative Identity Associations
The Black church has served as a safe space for Black people who have desired to escape the racism and negative associations related to their racial identity. These negative stereotypes have long stigmatized Black people in traditional public and private educational settings. The culturally relevant environment of the Black church has served as a place where participants can fully engage as their authentic selves without fear of racism, racial microaggressions, or mistreatment owing to their racial identity. Racial identity has been identified as a factor influencing academic achievement as early as preschool (Okeke et al., 2009).

The concept of stereotype threat was introduced by Steele (1997), who proposed that awareness of a social stereotype that reflects negatively on one’s social group can negatively affect the performance of group members. Researchers have consistently found that in a stereotype threat condition, individuals underperform on cognitive tasks compared with nongroup members. (Okeke et al., 2009)

As a safe space, the Black church fulfilled those needs of the participants and provided an opportunity for them to learn without having to second-guess if race was a factor in their success or failure.

The Black church has a longstanding history of being a racial sanctuary and safe space in the Black community. African Americans have a history of turning to the church to cope with racial injustice, bias, and discrimination. According to McAdoo (2007), the Black church is a place where African American students are taken to help them build an affirmative ethnic identity, and church attendance is associated with less internalization of negative stigmas and stereotypes related to their race. The internalization of these stigmas continues to influence students throughout their educational journey into higher education. The bond of trust associated with African Americans and their place of worship can be described as deeply rooted and
McAdoo (2007) referred to the extended family and support system of the Black church as fictive kin—or those who are seen in the same context as blood relatives.

Asha, a 33-year-old female, described her experience of feeling supported and valued in the church as opposed to other institutions. She spoke about being able to avoid feelings of shame and embarrassment owing to the protection the church provided her.

I would say it was more personal, and then you had a lot of people there that you can relate to. So instead of it being like strangers at a school, you had people that you knew. You didn’t have to feel ashamed or embarrassed or feel less than because of what others might have thought of you.

It was important for Asha to be surrounded by people who made her feel like she belonged and to not feel threatened by negative stereotypes associated with her skin color. The desire for safety was expressed when she discussed the idea of feeling ashamed or less than in terms of what other participants would think of her. When I asked Asha if she could clarify her last statement, she went on to say:

You know, I mean, I was not that great or serious in high school. My teachers really didn’t seem to care or expect much from me anyway and eventually I kind of stopped caring too. I went to a predominantly white high school when I went to live with my father and never felt accepted by my classmates or teachers for that matter. Like my teachers would ask me questions like I was supposed to speak on behalf of all Black people; it was crazy.

Asha’s depiction is of feeling out of place and the lack of support from teachers, is something that many Black students who attend PWIs of higher learning have experienced. This speaks to her level of safety because this situation could pose further problems for her in terms of
her own mental health or her fear of judgement. Her experience is not unique, and feeling uncomfortable can equate to not feeling welcomed or inherently deficient owing to your Black racial identity and its associated stereotypes.

A fundamental component for learning exists in a space where people feel safe and a sense of belonging, which has been identified as a basic human need (Strayhorn et al., 2012). One participant, Joy, a 47-year-old minister, described a fellow parishioner’s experience about seeking educational programs in the church; explaining her feelings of embarrassment and her level of comfort with the church, she avoided seeking such programs elsewhere:

There’s a lot of people that are around us, we don’t even know, they don’t have a GED or a high school diploma. I was talking to this woman: you wouldn’t have ever thought that she didn’t have a GED or high school diploma and her thing was she wanted to; she wants the GED or high school diploma but she’s embarrassed to go to like a community college …. She’s interested and looking for a church that’s willing to offer, and I know our church is trying to get the resources to help, have a class where people can get their GED. She will attend there more than she would a community college. I asked her and her answer was she was embarrassed because for so many years ….. And so I think for the smaller environment, you already feel comfortable in church, so you know because you’re around, most of the time you’d be around people that you really know, you know what I’m saying? I think it’s more like their environment.

Joy’s statement reiterates the idea that the Black church provides a safe space for people to learn and engage in the community. She discussed the idea of feeling comfortable and the need to avoid embarrassment, which insinuates the need to feel safe. She restated this notion
again at the end of the quote by referencing the idea of being around people you know and the importance of the learning environment.

Deborah, a 34-year-old minister, discussed how the church provided her an opportunity to lead in ways that seemed impossible for her in other work and educational settings. She discussed how she felt unqualified, nervous, and overwhelmed in previous educational settings that made her feel like an outsider. Deborah stated:

I have been in a lot of work and educational environments that don’t value me or what I bring to the table. I felt like I had to constantly be aware of my actions so I didn’t seem like I was lazy, too loud, or whatever thoughts they had about Black women. I was able to gain confidence in myself through my leadership positions in my church. I was able to really grow.

Deborah discussed the self-policing of her own behaviors, which is a common activity for Black people, owing to the widespread and deeply problematic stereotypes. She felt that in the church, she was able to shed the responsibility of making White people comfortable with her actions and behaviors and focus on her personal development and growth.

Sean, who is a 40-year-old male, also discussed the idea of codeswitching to feel safe in predominately White educational settings. Sean attended a PWI in Virginia for his bachelor’s degree; he discussed the differences he felt related to the climate for growth. It seems that his ability to have a place to retreat from the constant stereotypes associated with being a tall, Black man at this university was highly significant.

When I was in school, we had a space for the Black students that we used to get together and play cards, kick it, etc., you know. In the center, we could laugh out loud without worrying if others were judging or stereotyping us. Outside of the center though, going to
class and living in the residence halls was tough because it’s like everything made you feel like you didn’t belong there. I was smart but rarely spoke in class unless I was 250% sure I was right. Also, I am pretty tall, as you know, and at least almost five times a day, I would be stopped and asked if I was on the basketball scholarship, even with my professors. Once I told them no, it’s like my value was gone, and the conversation ended.

Sean’s experience as a Black male on a predominately White campus is not an isolated incident and can been seen in the experiences of many Black students at PWIs. Sean later discussed how finding his path in the church through various leadership workshops, conferences, and trainings while in college helped him to understand his worth and cope with the negative feedback he was receiving from his university.

I thought about leaving a lot, but once I joined a Black church in the area, I started to feel more confident in myself; no one was asking me about basketball but praising me for my academics and being an engineering major. Some of my friends attended too and it was really like an escape for us, similar to the Black student center but this was off campus and it was adults that made us feel good about ourselves.

The space provided by the Black church is a refuge for many people to be protected from the psychological fatigue that can come from negative identity associations. In the next section, I will explore how the relationships with church leadership further contributed to the success of adult learners.

Sydney, 40, who attends a church with a membership of approximately 2,000 members, described the influence of having Black role models because of the Black church. This translated to her associating Black professionals within the scope of her own expectations for success.
Having role models that looked like her communicated a sense of positive identity association and possibility.

But I know that when I grew up in this church, that it was important for my parents, for me to be around people of color and see them in a professional light. I might have been the only person of color in my school all day Monday through Friday in the classes I was in. … I didn’t realize how that affected me: not seeing a Black teacher, a teacher that looked like me at all. I didn’t realize that until I got to college and talked to other people—that not having a black teacher was that common.

Sydney went on to further describe the impact that having a Black teacher and role models has had on her children:

So, my children though, they do have a much more diverse school. They do have diversity with their teachers as well. But at the church, you know, we expose them to role models that are in multiple professions. So, they know much more about who does what. They know that there are a lot of Black teachers in the church, and they know that there are a lot of Black engineers, and just everything that runs the gamut of professions at the church.

Visibility was of primary importance in her children constructing positive images of African Americans in professions that are oftentimes limited in racial representation. Sydney discussed the impact of not having a Black teacher and not having a realization that Black teachers in fact did exist until she got to college.

Barnes (2010) noted that the Black church has historically encouraged education, business development, independence, and the opportunity to build its members’ self-esteem and prepare them to be successful in their careers and beyond. The Black church provides a space
that values the racial identity of its members and offers a space for Black parishioners to be unapologetically Black. The participants recognized the Black church as a space where they could authentically be themselves and be protected from the negative stereotypes associated with their behaviors, intelligence, and other intersecting identities. These stereotypes have been so powerful and present in their daily lives that living with stereotypes has become a difficult reality they face whenever they enter academic spaces. Participants spend a significant amount of energy buffering, coping with, and navigating these negative identity associations instead of using that energy on learning and unapologetically being themselves.

**Advocacy from the Black Church was Considered Significant to Learner Engagement**

Participants described the need to feel cared about and supported, especially during difficult life challenges. The literature on the sense of belonging and fictive kin relationships establishes a foundation for the relevance of this theme. Thompson and McRae (2001) discussed how the theory of belonging could influence someone’s fundamental well-being. The informal networks and relationships created in the Black church speak to the “therapeutic function of religious affiliations in Black communities” (Thompson & McRae, 2001, p. 40). These functions manifested a need for community advocacy to assist parishioners in coping with a multitude of life issues and problems. Participants spoke about how the church advocated for their needs through relevant programs, assistance, and services.

Feeling supported and genuinely cared for as a person was a concept that was important to many of those interviewed for this study. Understanding some of the unique challenges that face many members of the African American community can help to inform the services that the church provides for the community. The programs that the church offers served as a type of advocacy and empowerment to its members and the community.
Sydney, 40, who is actively involved in several of her church’s ministries, discussed the importance of the church educating its members on a variety of issues that could significantly impact their quality of life. Sydney’s discussion of how the church provided important education to help its members become financially literate and well-informed about bank loans and home ownership indicates its importance.

Oh, when we went through our recession, our county was awful in foreclosure. Like we were tops in the country when the housing market kinda bust. And someone actually stood up and said, “What are we doing for our members, our congregation on getting them smart on these loans that they may have gotten into that are bad loans, and are busting, and the houses are no longer in value, what have you?” And we were able to address it, and they started a community council to deal with it, and it actually went through and made some changes with the bank, like working with the banks to get people out of bad loans.

The insights that Sydney offers are that the church provided a support program in response to the needs of its community. Sydney went on to discuss how her church has addressed issue of food insecurity and homelessness in the community/congregation and how the church had implemented programs to assist with those issues. She worked closely with many of these programs and discussed how many members who needed these services were embarrassed about getting help and would most likely not have done so if it were not offered by the church.

Sydney described the ways in which the church helped older members to avoid being taken advantage of during the housing crisis. This type of advocacy centers the needs of the parishioners and is attuned to the pulse of societal issues.
A lot of our members are older and are scared of getting taken advantage of, and they don’t know how to ask for the help they need. I heard from several members about how grateful they were for the support and education on the mortgages and assistance with the banks.

These types of problematic systems shine a light on the need for churches to provide ongoing support for the communities, especially to some of the most vulnerable communities. The programs provide an ongoing sense of belonging to the members while meeting their needs.

One of the participants discussed how her church provided emotional support to her when her father was battling prostate cancer. Sarah, 39, discussed how she was going through a difficult time financially and how the church helped her to cope with her problems. Sarah considered this kind of support crucial to her rebuilding her life:

I’m trying to rebuild my credit, trying to have more than $5.00 in my pocket at the end of the month, living from paycheck to paycheck. I get encouragement at my church from my church family, pastor, and others. Pastor teaches us about financial management in a way that is easy to understand. He talks to us and not down to us, like some people do when you go out in the community.

The level of condescension that Sara described in “being talked down to” is the type of negative experience that influences learner engagement. The supportive kinship in her church helped her to be resilient during a difficult time in her life. Taylor et al. (2001) asserted, “extended family, friends, church members, neighbors, and fictive kin constitute complementary sources of informal support for African Americans” (p. 439). Relationships are an important aspect of all learning environments, especially when health connections are formed that impact the learner’s success. The literature has highlighted that a sense of belonging is rooted in a desire
to connect with others, have perceived social support, and feel that you matter to others (Strayhorn, 2019).

Sandra, a 38-year-old female, expressed how important the encouragement from her associate pastor and from the leader of her generational group was to her experience. She described this empowerment as a tool that helped her overcome her self-imposed limitations.

My church is pretty large, but despite the size I have always felt a very personal connection to my associate pastor and my group leader because they constantly encouraged me and challenged me to push myself past my comfort zone. I am a pretty shy person but I eventually started the training to become an orientation leader in our church because of their encouragement.

Sandra’s relationship with the leadership in her church made her feel comfortable with engaging in activities at a higher level because of her connections. She felt supported by the welcoming environment they provided and the personal attention she received despite the size of the church.

Thomas, a 45-year-old minister of music, talked about how his relationships with the musical directors in this church growing up into adulthood impacted his desire to pursue music.

I was always interested in music and played several different instruments in middle and high school, but I felt like I got passed over a lot for leadership roles, which were mostly given to White students regardless of talent, in my opinion. I connected with the musical directors at my church and they really helped to feel confident in my abilities, and I was able to break out into a lot of leadership roles in my church. They mentored and believed in me and it helped me deal with my experiences in marching band and the other bands I was in.
The idea of the Black church leaders serving as support systems in the African American community is not a new phenomenon. The literature has highlighted the historical role of the church in addressing the social and education needs of its communities; however, there are gaps in the literature addressing how the church more specifically meets the needs of its members. The framework or approach of the Black church demonstrates the need for culturally relevant program models that focus on all aspects of the learner. William said this about the role of the church members as role models and in building relationships with young people:

So, there’s a very, very broad spectrum, but at the end of the day we just need to become more I think assertive in how we’re depositing seeds in our young people outside of the academy so that they can continue to see the importance of strong positive active contributors to society, so that their lives can be, you know, you can continue to spiral upward.

The relationships formed and nurtured throughout the Black church among its members seem to give people the support, confidence, and security they need to be successful. The representation of successful leadership who are Black can impact the experiences of those seeking role models that look like them. The Black church has a long history of social justice reform that seeks to improve the lives and circumstances of its members. Participants recognized the church as a key figure influencing their ability to overcome difficult challenges and positioning them to be successful.

**Trust in the Educational Spaces Contributed to Learners’ Success**

Trust is developed not only in the programs of the church but also through the level of engagement of church leaders. The participants considered their relationship with church leaders to have a significant influence on their engagement. There was a need to feel a sense of trust in
the church’s leadership and in the fact that decisions were being made with their well-being in mind. Trust has been uniquely tied to the leadership of the Black church. Several participants discussed how the leadership and key figures in the church established a culture that allowed them to feel welcomed and comfortable.

The relationship and level of trust associated with the church family is akin to the bonds developed among biological relatives. Joanna (53) described that she chose to participate in a mortgage seminar offered by her church primarily owing to trust and the familiar environment of the church.

The familiarity of being around the members of the church. The people they brought in were also church members who worked in that field. Having that trust and ability to ask questions to familiar people. Important to belong to a church that wants its members to be property owners and prosper. Many times, you hear about programs that charge a fee and you don’t get the information you expected, and it may not be a reputable program. In this case, the companies were reputable and professional. I felt very secure in the information that was provided because I trust my church to provide professional and trustworthy programs.

Safety and trust were found to be important themes in Joanna’s statement. Joanna expressed her desire to participate in a program that was “familiar” and had “like-minded individuals.” She went on to express the importance of the church in empowering her by wanting her to become a homeowner and to be prosperous, which indicates that she felt that the church had her best interests in mind. The church, as a sponsor of this program, not only allowed Joanna to feel more comfortable in participating but also made her feel secure in acting on the information she received.
This sentiment is echoed in the comments of Marvin (63) on his participation in an investment seminar. Marvin discussed the importance of trust in influencing his decision to participate:

I felt it more trustworthy getting it from the church. The people that set it up were people I knew and trusted. I trusted their opinion and influences in terms of bringing someone in. I felt more comfortable and confident in the program. I ended up investing and it actually turned out to be a very profitable investment.

When prompted further about the influence of trust on his decision, Marvin stated:

Oftentimes, people in the world have negative stereotypes about African American people when it comes to finances, loans, and other things. It kind of makes me cautious about the information they provide me and whether or not I can trust it.

The statement provides insights into the ways in which some African Americans are influenced by the perception of negative racial stereotypes held by those in the greater society. Marvin described the concept of stereotype threat that interferes with people of colors’ ability to be successful owing to their fear of conforming to negative stereotypes about their social groups, such as race.

Thomas (45) described how trust in the people he received information from was critically important to how he engaged with those resources:

I trust the people in my church to provide better resources because I know that I have faced discrimination in other places based on my race when seeking assistance. People have these stereotypes about Black people that keep them down.
The statement by Thomas affirms that the concept of trust is important owing to the ongoing discrimination and oppression of Black people in society. Culturally relevant learning allows the learner to establish a connection of trust and set a high standard of expectations, which empowers the learner to become their best selves in a supportive climate. Ladson-Billings (1994) emphasized the importance of utilizing students’ culture as a primary method for learning. Creating programs that build on the culture of the learner provides a foundation that values the learner’s culture and perspective.

In addition, participants discussed how the “space” of the church made them feel valued. Theresa (40), who attends a Baptist church with over 2,000 members, discussed the importance of having educational programs offered at her church and the level of trust associated with those programs:

So, I think by having it at the church, especially a church—well, I will say once you are a member of the church and you have gone through and actually joined a church, you’ve put a lot of trust there. So, by going down and agreeing to be a member and a part of this church, there’s a—it’s just a respect, a trust. There’s a—you kind of already have vetted it yourself as far as what it is that you think of these people and what they believe and would you trust them with your—I mean, trusting them with your spirituality and your spiritual growth is a big thing. It is a big deal to choose a church and to align yourself to it. I mean, that’s a—it’s just a huge commitment, I think.

Theresa’s statement was saturated in a discussion of trust and the importance for her to feel connected to others through relationships and vulnerability. She found the information more credible because of her trust in the individuals who were setting up the educational programs and in their concern for her well-being. Theresa went on to say:
And so there’s just a lot more with that relationship than it is just to go out and take a class or be a part of a program in some of these other community organizations. I feel like when I participate in the programs at the church, they are set up for me to succeed, and I feel like that is important. What I bring to the classes or workshops is appreciated.

The participants’ discussions reflect their beliefs that having a deeper level of trust with the church provided them with the support they needed to overcome the challenges they faced in other educational settings. The participants felt that the church was invested in their success and wanted to see them thrive. Trust in their environment and those associated with it was key to their involvement in the educational programs at their church.

**Culturally Relevant Learning Spaces Positively Influenced Learner Engagement**

Participants considered their success to be influenced by the culturally relevant nature of the environment the Black church provided. Their discussions on culture were highlighted throughout their dialogs referencing their participation in church-based adult education. Participants were able to find culturally relevant curriculum and resources designed to value the experiences they bring to the table. They felt encouraged to seek educational opportunities that may have previously seemed unattainable.

William (57), who has been a pastor for over 10 years, discussed the importance of providing culturally relevant supportive programs in the church. He described the importance of people being able to see themselves represented in the programs.

It is important that we make sure that our congregations can see themselves in the programs we provide and meet them where they are. What you are teaching has to connect to their real lives and meet some type of need.
This quote connects to the themes that Ladson-Billings explored in culturally relevant teaching by allowing learners to engage in ways that are meaningful to them. Henry, a 36-year-old male pastor, also talked about this experience of participating in an introductory 6-week medical assistance course he took at his church that was offered in collaboration with a local community agency. The course was designed to provide a skillset designed to assist others in case of a medical emergency. He admits that he initially was nervous because he did not feel prepared but because his church was offering it, he felt more comfortable in participating.

Henry states the following about the course:

At first, I was unsure about taking this class because I don’t know a lot of medical assistance, etc. I was interested because we have a lot of older members and I wanted to able to help people in need. The program really allowed us to use information we already knew and built upon that. They asked about how we grew up learning about different topics from our mother/grandmothers, etc., and we found so much in common with each other. It really felt good to realize that we knew much more than we thought.

Henry’s experience highlights the importance of valuing learners’ experiences as relevant. Although he was initially hesitant, because of the course, he felt encouraged and affirmed that he was smart enough to be there. The teachers were also African American, which Henry noted was important to him because it made him feel more connected to the class. Henry referred to the teachers by saying:

The teachers were both Black, a male and female, and it was nice to see them teaching the class. They were very relatable and encouraging; seeing them made me feel even more like I really could do this. They joked about myths related to medicine in the Black community; they made it fun.
Having instructors that are relatable and that utilize culturally relevant curriculum can be an important factor for participants. Representation of people who looked like him was also important to Henry, as can be inferred from his response. Having role models that look like them in the classroom could serve to inspire young members of the church to pursue higher education and to see themselves in similar professions. Culturally relevant learning encompasses the idea that these young people feel empowered in their attitudes to envision their success because of being exposed to positive images.

Denise expressed her thoughts about growing up in a small church in Georgia that did not have formal educational programs but had members in education that provided a network of support for students. The cultural relevance of seeing role models that looked like them represented how this influenced their success and engagement.

I definitely do because like I said, even though growing up I did not have educational programs per se that my church did to help those of us that were growing up, there were educators in our church, like principals, teachers, and other professionals. You know they would stress to us the importance of getting your work done and doing well in school. If you have book reports or papers to write in high school, and getting that correct format down with, they would help you and proofread your stuff. Seeing them as professionals made us feel like we could be like them and be professionals too. Most of our teachers in regular school were White, except for a very few, so it felt good to see them represented at church.

The educational and social needs of the African Americans in this study seem to be vested in the concept of a having a culturally relevant learning space and instructors that serve as
reflections of success and motivation. Participants’ perceptions on their level of engagement, awareness, and relatability can be seen through their narratives.

Summary

The role of the Black church in the realm of education has deep, interconnected roots that continue to grow and develop with the church’s outreach and influence. According to the parishioners, the Black Church provided their parishioners with a place where they could engage in learning without restrictions associated with stereotypes that limited their participation. Building an environment of trust allowed the learners to feel more secure in their classes and workshops. The importance of advocacy and empowerment manifested by the Black church was highlighted by parishioners in their discussion. Culturally relevant learning spaces helped them to bring their full authentic selves to the table and feel validated that their experiences were valuable. These valued contributions could be interpreted as a window to their needs which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5.
Chapter Five

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the Black church on the decisions of adult learners to participate in church-based adult education and therefore to inform higher education initiatives devoted to increasing retention and academic success of Black students. This chapter discusses the major findings related to the role of the Black church as culturally relevant space to retrieve best practices that can influence the experiences of African Americans regarding higher education. Further examination of the racial climate for African American adult learners in spaces of higher education, motivation theory, and the opportunities for faith-based partnerships with colleges and universities is required.

A mixed-methods design approach was utilized for this study to gain a more holistic perspective in relation to the research questions. This approach was used to build from one phase of the study to another and obtain more detailed information. The quantitative study comprised surveys distributed at four different Black churches across different geographic locations, denominations, and sizes. Data were collected through the surveys, and data from a total of 250 participants were included in the final analysis. The quantitative study revealed that the Black church had a significant influence on adult learners continuing their education; therefore, the study was expanded as a qualitative study to find out the “why.” To expand upon the data collected in the surveys, participants of the qualitative study comprised 16 members of churches who participated in the quantitative study. This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews that varied in length. The qualitative responses of the participants provided valuable insights on the influence of the Black church in meeting the participants’ needs as learners, as the
literature indicates that the Black church is influential in meeting the needs of adult learners. This context will be discussed in response to the research questions that guided this study.

(RQ1): Which of the five motivational dimensions identified by Isaac et al. (2001) are the most important factors in church members’ decisions to participate in church-based adult education?

(RQ2): How does the environment of the Black church influence its members to expand upon their education?

(RQ3): How do Black churches address the social and educational needs of the African American community?

Discussion

Despite the growth in the membership of the Black church, including megachurches, published research on contemporary adult education within its confines is limited (Isaac et al., 2001). Whereas motivation in general has been widely studied, race is a factor that is limited or nonexistent in much of the research that predominantly focuses on White youth and men (Isaac et al., 2001). This mixed-methods study sought to identify the motivational dimensions that parishioners identified as factors influencing not only their participation in church-based adult education but also why they selected the church as the site for learning. “Adult education has historically been presented as a means of improving an individual’s life within society. With an emphasis on individual growth, adult education was directed towards helping adults to cope with and function in a changing social milieu” (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 52). In this study, coping with personal life challenges was identified as a significant reason for people to participate in adult education activities sponsored by the Black church. Knowledge is viewed as
inseparable from the ever-changing life experiences of the individual in a societal context. The Black church provides a unique opportunity to capture the educational experiences of Black adult learners, which could serve to shape the recruitment and retention practices of higher education. Nearly eight in ten African Americans (79%) identify as Christian, according to Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study. By comparison, seven in ten Americans overall (71%) say they are Christian, including 70% of Whites, 77% of Latinos, and 34% of Asian Americans (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/23/black-americans-are-more-likely-than-overall-public-to-be-christian-protestant/).

Personal and shared cultural experience is a critical component of what religious education has to offer many African Americans who attend church. Although one does not expect a clear dividing line between culture, religion, and education, a unique fact of African American religious education is that it heavily relies on cultural experience in what it has to offer (Hinton, 2009). Education in the Black community has long been aligned with upward mobility and as a tool to deconstruct racial disparities and to interrupt systems of inequality (Barnes, 2005).

Regarding research question one (R1) which focuses on identifying the most relevant dimensions, the three factors with the highest mean values were spiritual and religious development (3.848), supporting in facing personal challenges (3.693), and love of learning (3.097). Support facing personal challenges indicates that participants looked to church for ways to navigate difficult situations. During the interviews with participants in the qualitative section of this study, several participants alluded to challenges that they faced in prior educational environments that impacted their experiences. They spoke about feeling safe from the stereotyping that impacted their learning experiences in other spaces. I argue that support in
facing personal challenges for many participants could encompass the challenges they face regarding systematic racial inequities, discrimination, White supremacy, and racism. The literature has reinforced the idea that many members who attend the Black church have found it to be therapeutic in nature, especially during overwhelming and challenging times. As discussed in the literature review, Chatters et al. (2002) argued that the church could provide support for addressing the complex issues that have the potential to undermine motivation and paralyze individuals. Although the participants in the quantitative study did not necessarily find that the familiar cultural setting had a significant influence on their motivation to participate in adult-based education at their religious institutions, contextual factors exist that may have contributed to this finding, which were further explored in the qualitative study.

Participants in the qualitative study identified the ways in which stereotypes about their racial identity influenced their decisions to participate in higher education. Research question two (R2) addresses the ways in which the Black church influences members to expand upon their education. The research that follows identifies the need of learners to feel insulated and safe from the impact of racial stereotypes and the negative impact it had on their ability to succeed. Parishioners spoke of feeling protected in the church from the negative stereotypes about their race that they experienced in academic institutions. Although the interviewed participants did not describe their experiences using the term microaggressions, these interactions would now be defined as such. Microaggressions is a term coined in 1970 by psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce to describe the insults and bias that he witnessed African Americans were subjected to from non-Black Americans. Derald Wing Sue expanded on the work of Pierce to include other marginalized identity groups that are subjected to discrimination predominantly by those who do not identify with those groups.
“Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities—whether intentional or unintentional—that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). While there was evidence of verbal microaggressions, much of what the participants discussed were environmental indignities as influenced by a socialized system of bias, sometimes referred to as the cycle of socialization.

Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities; however, this ignorance does not reduce or eliminate the impact on those affected. Racial microaggressions have remained a primary experience that many African Americans face daily, whether they realize it or not. Sean, a participant in the qualitative study referenced the questions and assumptions associated with his height at this PWI, that was a stereotype related to his ascription of intelligence. The idea that because of his height he had to be at his university because of physical attribute instead of his inherit intelligence is an example of how stereotypes manifest into microaggressions. While microaggression can come from those to share similar identities, racial slights generally come from the majority race. Microaggressions at their root are the frequent ways in which society normalizes Whiteness and others Blackness in a way that can be psychologically harmful. The frequency at which Black people experience microaggressions can vary based on other intersecting identities, such as gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

These microaggressions can affect the mental health of the targeted people by creating unwelcoming environments. Sandra, a participant discussed how the church made her feel welcomed and empowered her to exceed beyond her own limitations. The Black church provided her an environment that was not only supportive but didn’t use her racial identity as a biased way
of consciously or unconsciously hindering her progress. Battle (2006) paid attention to the fact that “in destroyed urban neighborhoods and deserted rural ones, churches are often the only survivor institutions” (p. 128). He further explained how the church in the African American community is one of the most trusted and dominant institutions and has been regarded as a refuge from wider societal injustice (Battle, 2006). The historical accounts of racial discrimination faced by many African Americans in institutions of higher learning have left many with negative perspectives on the formalized system of education in the United States.

The accumulation of racial microaggressions can affect students of color in terms of successful persistence, retention, and graduation rates. The other theme that resonates from the work of Isaac and Rowland (2002) is Afrocentric affirmations, which reflects much of the sentiments of the self-ethnic psychosocial theme. According to Isaac and Rowland (2002), “although the African American preacher discusses the various negative experiences of African Americans, he or she is also skillful in affirming them. Preachers often remind listeners of how they have been successful despite the injustices they have faced” (p. 5). Higher education must seek to address the ongoing systematic issues that allow racism and bias to run rampant and unchecked on college campuses. Providing cultural centers with limited budgets, staffing, and resources is no more than aesthetic adhesive bandage for a problem that is cancerous in nature. The Black church provides insights into how to create culturally affirming spaces that exist outside of cultural centers and extend to classrooms, residence halls, and beyond.

The Black church provides a framework that highlights the need for higher education institutions to educate their faculty and staff about the microaggressions that Black students face at PWIs. Training should be mandatory for all faculty and staff and should be more than checklist training, the constant negative messages that Black people receive as a result of their
existence in society have created psychological and emotional barriers that can stifle success in their careers, education, and relationships. One of the primary components of critical race theory (CRT) is counter storytelling, which is a “framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). Counter stories are stories about people of color that present personal narratives rooted in truth, dignity, and affirmation (Hiraldo, 2010). In their review of the Black sermon, Isaac and Rowland (2002) found that the framework of the sermon provided essential counter stories designed to uplift Black people.

Research question three (R3) addresses how the Black church addresses the social and educational needs of the African American community. The third theme of trust in church leadership and programs is a representation of the participants’ feelings that the church offered them a space where leadership and others had an authentic investment in their well-being. This safe space was recognized as such because participants were buffered from negative identity associations, were provided supportive programs, and could cultivate beneficial relationships with those seen as leaders in the church. This trust was discussed in many ways, such as in relation to the lack of fear, lack of embarrassment, and not being taken advantage of in the church environment as opposed to other agencies. This theme was associated with the perceptions of support and care the church holistically offered to participants. This support was widely discussed through the educational programs and overall support the church provided in ensuring that the members’ basic needs were met in addition to the inherent value of their identity.

The fourth theme of providing culturally relevant learning spaces was significant to learners’ ability to relate to their curriculum. Participants valued having instructors that looked like them and modeled cultural references in their teachings. All these factors are critical to the
role the Black church plays in supporting and motivating its members to seek educational opportunities to change their circumstances or the circumstances of their community.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the definition of the sermon theme of self-ethnic psycho-cultural is as follows: “People of African descent have continually received negative messages about themselves. It is important for preachers to deliver sermons that reverse the negative mindset that has stifled the African American community” (Isaac & Rowland, 2002, p. 5). Preachers have a significant platform to engage their congregations in counter stories on a frequent basis. The impact of these messages can help neutralize the negative stereotypes and internalized racism that can settle in the spirits of Black people because of White supremacy. The negative messages that the Black participants received about themselves from various social forces have impacted the ways in which they choose to engage with higher education.

Hiraldo (2010) stated, “the legacy of racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society. Many predominantly-white institutions (PWIs) of higher learning have spaces where students from marginalized or underrepresented groups can have their identities celebrated and affirmed. Cultural centers for many students serve as a home away from home and provide a pause or temporary reprieve from the microaggressions, stereotypes, and bias that are prevalent on the campuses of PWIs. In a 2017 study conducted by Robertson and Chaney on the mental fatigue that Black students face trying to suppress or dilute their behaviors, two themes emerged: “(1) Racism and Racial Microaggressions and (2) The African American experience is not important to faculty and the university” (p. 260).

Creating an environment of inclusion will require faculty and staff to be aware of the specific ways in which Black students are accidentally excluded in academic institutions. However, simply being aware of the issues is insufficient; faculty and staff must create strategies
to address the discrepancies in the treatment of Black and White students that lead to a failed sense of belonging and ability to thrive among the former. We must investigate the spaces that continue to cause psychological harm to Black students, including that via inequitable policies, procedures, access, and opportunities. Diminishing the environmental and psychological microaggressions that Black students face is a crucial component to increasing their engagement and retention.

Higher education institutions must provide financial and human capital as well as space resources to the cultural centers that support Black students in universities.

One example of a safe space could be Black cultural centers that affirm Black students’ racial identity and connect them to the campus in a more intimate and connected manner. The programming of cultural centers is centered on enhancing the experiences of Black students, with much of it being led in part by student co-creators of the content. Cultural centers can serve as a pathway of participation for many marginalized students who get overwhelmed and lost on a larger campus. Patton (2006) conducted a study that revealed Black students “indicated that they derived a number of benefits from the Black Cultural Center (BCC), including increased opportunities for involvement and preparation for student leadership, a richer understanding of their community, enhanced development of their black identity, increased pride in their shared history, and an enrichment of strategies for thriving in college” (p. 6). The role of the Black cultural center on predominately White campuses cannot be understated and needs to be centered in campus strategic plans with more institutional support.

Jarvis (1987) provided some insights into how socioeconomic status can influence the desire to seek higher education. He suggested that those seeking higher education from more affluent backgrounds have been more successful because of access and resources, unlike those
from the working classes who were unsuccessful during their initial education, have tended to avoid furthering their education. This explanation provides possible insights into the disproportionate number of African Americans that participate in higher education in comparison to other races. Smedley et al. (2001) discussed the impact that labeling has had on formal education in terms of classifying students according to their abilities and how this has affected African American and Latino students. African American students have faced a unique set of circumstances concerning their adjustment in PWIs. Woldoff et al. (2011) stated:

Once enrolled in institutions of higher education, Blacks soon find that they must learn to adjust both socially and academically to their new environment, which at most institutions means being surrounded by Whites. In general, the term adjustment refers to students’ ability to adapt successfully to the expectations of college. (p. 1050)

According to Smedley et al. (2001), African American and Hispanic students are frequently advised that they will not successfully matriculate through high school and that vocational education may be a better alternative for them in enhancing their marketability in the workforce. This type of advice indicates the limited academic expectations placed on African American students in relation to their career and educational mobility.

Because of this isolation, the Black church has stepped in to provide a safe and non-threatening place where African Americans could learn and experience personal development. The contemporary Black church has been playing a major role in building the intellectual self-esteem of African American youth (McCray et,al, 2010), thus giving them the confidence that they can achieve academic success. Woldoff et al. (2011) referenced that “Black collegians need to feel valued, safe, and accepted in order to feel at home, thrive during their time in college, and further develop into academically and socially well-rounded individuals” (p. 1048).
The concept of trust, safety, and belongingness emerged as an important factor in how the church influenced its members to continue higher education. In addition, the Black church provided an environment in which young adults could see successful people that looked like them in a wide array of professions. Black students may complete their post-secondary school and college education without having a Black teacher or professor. According to Gershenson et al. (2018), “black students randomly assigned to a black teacher are 5 percentage points (7%) more likely to graduate high school and 4 percentage points (4%) more likely to enroll in college than their peers who are not assigned to a black teacher.” By having African American leaders in the Black church that are not only visible but also willing to engage with young Black children helps to create a sense of belonging by cultivating the feeling that church members matter and care for one another. Sense of belonging is a fundamental need for all human beings that can influence behavior. Many churches today provide educational programs for those whom the public schooling system has failed. The educational programs offered by the church oftentimes provide a framework in which high academic expectations are the norm, which provides students with a supportive climate of challenge and support (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

The Black church presents an alternate reality of Black professional role models that is lacking in our formal educational system. Black professors in higher education are woefully underrepresented in institutions of higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019):

Of all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2018, some 40 percent were White males; 35 percent were White females; 7 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander males; 5 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander females; and 3 percent each were Black males, Black females, Hispanic males, and Hispanic females.
Those who were American Indian/Alaska Native and those who were of two or more races each made up 1 percent or less of full-time faculty.

This lack of visibility and representation speaks to the importance of students seeing professionals that look like them in the Black church, as their access is severely limited in the context of higher education. These representations are important not only for Black students but also for other students, to provide a more diverse representation of faculty members. The church’s educational programs can serve as conduits to address a plethora of issues. Gaines (2010) stated that “considering its pivotal role in Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, what better institution than the Black Church to ensure Black students would gain access to equitable and adequate education?” (p. 372).

**Implications**

The Black church has developed culturally relevant practices that has shaped the needs of their learners which has positively influenced their participants. The insights that can inform the practices of higher education are as follows:

a. The Black church is in a unique position to provide insights on creating more culturally relevant spaces for Black students in higher education.

b. Cultural centers for many students serve as a protective space that allows students to escape racial microaggressions, stereotypes, and bias that is prevalent on the campuses of PWIs.

c. PWIs of higher education need to remove barriers for Black students by investing in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
Black cultural centers, if they exist at all, are often extremely understaffed and under-resourced but carry high expectations of Black student retention. Colleges and universities must conduct a needs assessment that addresses the areas in which they are failing Black students. Patton (2006) expressed, “stereotypes have led to a widespread sense of marginalization and isolation in the university’s academic environment. The social environment is equally stressful. Few campuswide programs are devoted to the interests of black students. Major campus events, including homecoming, are racially divided” (p. 2). Higher education institutions need to invest in Black Cultural centers so that the level of engagement and programming can assist students at significant level. Black cultural centers oftentimes provide students with the language they need to negotiate the microaggressions and racial battle fatigue of being a black student at a PWI. I have worked in higher education cultural centers for over 22 years, and I recognized that students often identify similar symptoms of unwelcoming comments and negative slights without accurate language to identify and affirm their experiences. Black cultural centers like the Black church can not only shield students from negative identity associations but help them to advocate for change in their universities.

Cultural centers are spaces that allow students to not only exist in their own authentic identities but also educate them on cultural, history, and challenge them to critically engage in discussions on diverse topics. Many cultural centers connect students with faculty and staff with similar identities and interest through programming and informal networking. These connections can serve as invaluable resources and tools for students to navigate the large and complicated systems of higher education. As noted from the research of the Black church, providing a place of trust with people who advocate for learners is an important tool in meeting the needs of Black adult learners. Cultural center staff can become fictive kin and role models to many of the
students who frequent the cultural centers, like the relationships established in the Black church. This is key because there is a sense of trust that is developed, and students are more likely to share their struggles and in return get the assistance they need to remove barriers in their way.

Cultural centers bridge the gap between student’s other important campus offices critical to student success such as the counseling center, dean of students, financial aid, and registrar’s office which can help contribute the overall success of underrepresented students. Many of these students also have intersectional identities that layer their experiences, such as first generational college students who are the first ones in their family to attend a 4-year institution. Providing these students with equitable and culturally relevant resources is crucial to their belongingness and successful matriculation.

The Black church needs to continue capitalizing on its ability to engage and educate the disenfranchised and the disillusioned. According to Billingsley and Caldwell (1991), the “black church, the family, and educational institutions can interact to provide a major resource for strengthening African American communities” (p. 431). To remain relevant, the Black church will need to remain vigilant in their advocacy of the Black community in an increasingly racially and politically divided climate. The impact of Covid 19 has impacted the Black church just as it has every other institution, and the impact on the reliance on technology for church engagement has yet to be seen. The Black church will need to continue discussion on best practices for engaging Millennials, Generation Z and future generations as tool to invest in their institutional relevance and sustainability.
Limitations and Future Research

Admittedly, the size of the present sample was small and therefore impacts the extent to which extrapolations can be made based on the obtained results. However, given that disclaimer, it is apparent that a significant finding has been obtained regarding these groups that has not been a considerable part of the general discussion on participation in adult education among this population. Future research could use a larger qualitative sample to further strengthen and narrow the factors associated with the African American adult learner motivation within the context of religious institutions. A multidenominational study of the Black church could provide nuanced insights to meeting the needs of the learner by leaning into specific faith practices unique to each denomination.

Black cultural centers are fertile ground that need to be researched in greater detail. Specifically conducting research with the student who utilize the centers with a lens that explores the microaggression they face and their faith practices. This research could further inform PWI’s as to the barriers their black students face and ways to address and dismantle their structures that perpetuate these circumstances. Advanced research could look at how collaborations with local Black churches and Black cultural centers could impact student success in higher education.
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Appendix A

Survey for Quantitative Study

Your Invitation to Participate

We are conducting a study that focuses on how your church’s educational programs and activities have affected you. We are asking all members of your congregation to participate because we value your viewpoint and want the results of our study to reflect the opinions of as many members as possible. Participating will require only a small investment of your time: 15 minutes to complete the survey that follows.

Please read the following information:

The risks associated with participating in this research are considered to be minimal.

Because the survey is anonymous, your identity will not be known to anyone.

You may contact the researchers at a later time to obtain a summary of the research results.

The study data will be used to develop one or more papers that will be submitted to academic journals for publication. We may also present the findings at professional conferences or use them for other research purposes.

It is also possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Tech will view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for overseeing the protection of human subjects who are involved in research.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are also free to not answer any question.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact either of the two Virginia Tech researchers:

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Yolanda Avent, doctoral student in the Educational Psychology Program: ylavent@yahoo.com, 540-641-7974

If you agree to participate, please complete the attached survey. Doing so will imply your consent to participate in this study.

Survey of Church Members’ Motivations for Participating in
Church-Based Education Programs and Activities

The purpose of this survey is to better understand how your church’s educational programs and activities have affected you. By “educational programs and activities” we are referring to both religions and secular offerings such as (but not limited to): workshops, seminars, courses, study groups, bible study, leadership development, women’s ministry, men’s ministry, financial workshops, vacation bible school, prayer groups, outreach activities, choir, dance team, and/or drama club.

1. Are you 18 years old or older?
   a. No. Please do not complete the survey because it is specifically designed for adults 18 or older.
   b. Yes. Please continue to the next question.

2. Have you participated in at least one of your church’s educational programs or activities?
   a. No Please do not complete the survey because it is specifically designed for those who have participated in at least one of your church’s educational programs and activities (as defined above).
b. Yes. Please complete the remainder of the survey.

**Section 1**

For each item below, please select one number from the 4-point scale below that best describes your beliefs. There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your beliefs.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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1. **I participate in my church’s educational programs and activities because/to:**

1. ___ People are more accepting of me
2. ___ I feel more comfortable asking questions
3. ___ Learn more about God
4. ___ Learn more about my relationship with God
5. ___ Learning is exciting to me
6. ___ Gain knowledge
7. ___ Find ways to overcome personal challenges
8. ___ Get an encouraging word while going through a trial
9. ___ Family is participating
10. ___ Kids can participate in activities
11. ___ Interact with other Black people
12. ___ Feel more comfortable participating in discussions
Continued from above… I participate in my church’s educational programs and activities because/to:

1. ____ It makes me feel closer to God
2. ____ Be a better Christian
3. ____ Learn something new
4. ____ I value learning
5. ____ Get emotional support
6. ____ Learn survival skills
7. ____ Share in activities with a spouse or significant other
8. ____ I prefer the church to other educational settings
9. ____ I am more comfortable cause Black people are there
10. ____ Learn more about the Bible
11. ____ It is part of my duty to God
12. ____ Enhance knowledge about a particular subject
13. ____ Develop skills
14. ____ Fulfill a need in life
15. ____ Help with a situation at home
16. ____ It gives me something to do with other Christians
17. ____ It gives me something to do with people like me
18. ____ The Pastor emphasized the importance of education
19. ____ I like the Christian perspective of the course
20. ____ It is a good source of information
21. ____ Be a knowledgeable person
22. ____ Help with personal life
23. ____ Meet people who are facing problems similar to mine
24. ____ I am familiar with people at church
25. ____ It gives me something to do with people who have similar lifestyles
26. ____ Classes help me to live better
27. ____ Achieve a specific personal goal
28. ____ It is held in the Black community
29. ____ See my friends
30. ____ It gives me something useful to do
31. ____ Other people I respect are participating

Section 2

Please circle one answer for each of the following questions:

1  Gender:  1. Male  2. Female

1  Age:  1. 18-29  2. 30-39  3. 40-49  4. 50-59  5. 60 or over

1  What is the highest level of education you have completed?

2  Some high school
3  High school diploma
4  Some college
5  Associates Degree
6  Bachelor’s Degree
7  Graduate Degree
8  Other

1  What is your current marital status?

1  What is your religious affiliation?


1  What is your race?

1. African American or Black

2. American Indian

3. Asian or Pacific Islander

4. Caucasian or White (not Hispanic)

5. Hispanic

6. Other: ________________________________

Continue to next page

Section 3

1  Has participating in your church’s educational programs or activities affected your feelings about seeking more educational opportunities outside the church (such as enrolling in a college, a certificate program, professional development courses, etc.)?

a  No. Please continue to the next question.

b  Yes. Please describe how it has affected your feelings:

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________
Has participating in your church’s programs or activities encouraged you to participate in more educational programs or activities outside the church (such as enrolling in a college, a certificate program, professional development courses, etc.)?

a No. Please continue to the next question.

Yes. Please list the educational programs or activities:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are some aspects of the church’s programs or activities that have attracted you to participate in them?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________