Black religiosity: an analysis of the emergence and growth of black megachurches

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Black Religiosity: An Analysis of the Emergence and Growth of Black Megachurches

By

Delvon A. Benson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Master of Liberal Studies

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This study of the emergence of today’s Black megachurches (BMCs) is explanatory. It set out to identify specific plausible factors that contributed to the growth and success of BMCs at the start of the 21st century. This thesis indentifies four factors leading to the continued growth and success of BMCs: (1) Poaching potential members from other churches, (2) engaging the un-churched in and around a particular community, (3) merging smaller churches into the larger BMC, and (4) appealing to Blacks migrating to areas with higher concentrations of Black Americans, which formally meant migration to the North, but now, meaning migration to the South. These four factors were identified as a result of my studying and reflecting on the literature available on BMCs as well as megachurches in general. More specifically, my study has sought to identify and clarify factors that have plausibly contributed to the continuation of BMCs’ success and growth.
This Thesis is dedicated to my late Father, Obadiah Benson Sr.
Acknowledgments

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I would like to thank both Dr. Morris Jenkins and Dr. Carter Wilson for serving on of my committee.
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Background

The Black church as an institution has played a monumental role in the lives of African Americans, and the institution has had a monumental impact on the broader American society. For over 80% of the history of America as a sovereign country, the Black church has been recognized as the only institution in society that Blacks in America controlled and led. Prior to the social, political, and economic integration of African Americans into mainstream America, Black churches maintained a largely endogenous focus and orientation. Affirming the humanity of people of African descent who were systematically dehumanized by an emerging and unrestrained capitalism of Whites, which employed chattel slavery as a means of creating wealth and terrorizing slaves, was a part of the Black church’s reason for being. Providing solace under these conditions was understandably fundamental to the church’s mission back then.

Conversely, over the most recent 20% of America’s history, marked by Blacks having been largely integrated into mainstream society, the Black church has acquired more of an exogenous posture.

Today, the Black church remains as the only institution that Blacks control. What is different today, however, is that that institution has declined in its original importance as a result of Blacks having access to control and leadership of the preeminent
mainstream institutions in the broader society beyond the Black community. In addition to affirming humanity and providing solace, the Black church in segregated America also provided the principal institution for leadership training of Blacks, the exercise of leadership, and the identification of a means for acquiring and showcasing status. It should be noted that, today, the obvious and most glaring example of Blacks having opportunities for control of mainstream institutions, the exercise of leadership, and showcasing status in the broader society was the 2008 election of Barak Obama as president of the United States.

BMCs have been uniquely oriented in filling a new historical, religious, and institutional void in Black America since the 1990s. One could say that 1990 represented the demarcation of one full generation since the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Over that generation, large absolute numbers but not large percentages of Blacks began to advance in mainstream society. Now that African Americans are well into the second post-Civil Rights generation, institutions with an endogenous focus are ebbing just as those with exogenous focus or at least a hybrid of the two are flowing. BMCs, which began to flourish in the generation removed from segregation, may represent a new Black church model for the future post-Civil Rights Black America. In many respects, it represents continuity as well as change.

Thus, BMCs maintain the charismatic leadership style of clergy and the rhythmic foot-tapping style of gospel music, but they now seek to fulfill a different need of Blacks today. The crucial need of affirming the humanity of Blacks in the face of dehumanization has been replaced by the need of affirming prosperity impulses of Black congregants of BMCs. The prosperity gospel; the embodiment of supremely materially
successful clergy; the awe-inspiring architecture of the BMC buildings; the full panoply of programs and services that are intellectually, emotionally, religiously, and entertainingly stimulating to the urbane Blacks; and a union of thousands of successful members of high socioeconomic status—all of these elements collectively affirm and nourish the prosperity impulses of BMC congregants.

This study provides a close if not extensive examination of the emergence of BMCs. A literature on the subject has slowly begun to emerge, but not sufficient to match the prominence of the topic in the society. What this study has modestly attempted to do is to provide a framework for understanding how changing social structures contributed to the emergence of BMCs. An attempt has also been made to postulate a few specific factors that have contributed most significantly to BMC growth. The framework and postulation for how the BMCs emerged and evolved to their current state were generated from my extensive library research. The clarified framework and postulations proffered in this thesis direct attention to the need for a more systematic study involving primary empirical data.
Research Statement

The three areas studied in this research are: (1) Black megachurches’ emergence and growth in a historical perspective (chapter one), (2) a statistical and comparative analysis of 211 Black megachurches (chapter two), and (3) the four strategies Black megachurches have utilized to grow and flourish (chapter three).

The study is designed to supplement the literature on the emergence and growth of BMCs as well as to highlight the impact of BMCs on the overall religiosity of African Americans in a rapidly changing society.

Objectives of Study

1) To examine the dynamics of the BMC culture in America so as to add conceptual and analytical clarity for future studies of BMC growth in America within the African American religious experience.

2) To analyze secondary empirical data and informed perspectives on the Black megachurches’ influence on the lives of African Americans.

3) To analyze and offer an alternative way of comprehending and organizing existing research on BMC culture.

Research Questions

Two key questions will be addressed in this study. First, what are the antecedents of today’s BMCs? Second, what are plausible factors that account for the emergence and growth of BMCs?
Chapter 1

Historical View of Black Megachurch Phenomena

Megachurches in general have become a hot topic and a huge religious phenomenon in America today. Historically, the Black church has provided solace to its members and has served as a vehicle for their pursuit of social justice. Due to segregation, many historically Black churches made it their priority to provide a spiritual safety net and offer social services that are now available to all Americans via the government. Without the church, many Blacks would have suffered even more dramatically from deprivation of necessities as well as from an absence of spiritual enrichment and nourishment. Prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, problems such as segregation, oppression, lynching and other forms of racially motivated violence put a strain on the Black church with regard to protection of its members. In the post-Civil Rights era of America, a period when the most flagrant of these socially egregious actions have largely abated, the Black church remains as one of the most revered institutions in Black American communities. In recent years, BMCs have also gone
above and beyond the spiritual gospel and now preach economic and political gospels to its increasing membership. As K.A. King (2010) explains:

In its capacity as an independent, “un-bossed and un-bought” institution, the Black Church has been put in a preferred political position as it utilizes its indigenous resources (large memberships, finances, communication networks, and trained experts and professionals) to organize, mobilize, and act as a means of placing demands on governmental institutions at the local, county, state, and national level to change the accepted political, economic, and social norms of American Society. (p. 173)

This study accepts Scott Thumma and Dave Travis’s (2007) criterion of a megachurch as having a 2,000-membership threshold. However, the BMC requirements presented in this study are more comprehensive than the one-dimensional requirement established by Thumma and Travis. S.L. Barnes (2010a) simply notes that “Black megachurches have predominantly Black memberships and are led by Black pastors. They also tend to include elements from the Black church tradition during worship services.” The fourfold BMC criteria in this study are: (1) at least 2,000 members, (2) a continuous Black clergy, (3) Black gospel music, and (4) Prosperity gospel.

Conventional thinking holds that BMCs sprang up after 1980 without antecedents. That view is either incorrect or at best incomplete. In this study, a large Black church prior to 1980 had less than 2,000 members—but at least more than 1,000 members—or more than 2,000 members but had a gospel without a prosperity characterization. Such churches were the antecedents to the BMCs. These large Black church congregations prior to 1980 facilitated in some ways the emergence of the post-1980 BMC. Therefore, to some extent, today’s BMCs evolved out of a combination of the various large churches that preceded them in their “mega” congregational style of worship.

Large Black Churches Prior to the 1980s
This study posits that BMCs grew to their large size via four strategies: (1) Poaching, (2) engaging the un-churched, (3) merging smaller churches, and (4) migrating to growing areas. “Poaching” is a strategy used by a BMC to persuade church members of one church to start attending a particular BMC. Some churches have witnessed their congregants fleeing to BMCs. “Engaging the un-churched” is a strategy used by BMCs to attract attendees who formally did not attend church regularly, if at all. BMCs have also managed to fill a void unaddressed by traditional Black churches. “Merging” occurs when a BMC is able to integrate the congregations of one or more smaller congregations into a bigger BMC. Some BMCs are partially a culmination of the process of merging together smaller churches into a large BMC. Migration of Black middle-class members from North to South between the 1990s and 2010 has also contributed to the rise of BMCs, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Houston. This migration pattern is the reverse of previous decades when South to North migration helped fuel the growth of BMCs in Chicago, New York, and other northern cities. In order to establish a clear view of the gradual escalation of Black church congregations culminating in the existence of BMCs today, a timeline must be formulated.

Large Black churches from the 19th and early 20th centuries were forerunners to and provided models for the post-1980 BMCs. There have been multiple Black churches throughout history that have at various points exceeded the 2,000-level congregation threshold. Prior to the emergence of large Black migrations around the two World Wars, Black rural and town churches were bedrocks of stability and solace for families over multiple generations. However, the South to North and/or rural to urban migration of
Blacks facilitated the emergence of BMCs. Among the churches that this study identifies as BMCs, First African of Richmond, Virginia—despite its membership of 3,260 in 1860, continuous Black clergy, and its gospel music—is not a BMC (Gilkes, 1998). First African of Richmond is characterized as a large church and not a BMC because this church did not meet the Prosperity gospel criterion; however, as discussed above, such a church can be identified as an antecedent to the post-1980 BMC. Other large Black churches that existed prior to the 1980s but did not meet all four requirements to be a BMC include: Charles Grandison Finney's Broadway Tabernacle, built in 1836 to accommodate 4,000 people; De Witt Talmage's Third Tabernacle in Brooklyn, built in 1891 to seat 4,000 people; Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple, built in 1923 to accommodate 7,500; Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church, also in Brooklyn, built in 1850 to seat 2,000; Chicago's Moody Memorial Church, built in 1925 to seat 4,000; and the Mason Temple in Memphis, built in 1945 to seat 7,500 (Chaves, 2006).

In regard to education prior to integration, the Black church served as a learning center for Black Americans. In his study, J.L. Walton (2011) refers to First African as an example of this aspect of the Black church:

In the post-emancipation era, First African became the bedrock of black public life... The church hosted African American high school and normal school graduations...it served as the meeting place for various civic organizations, and even became the primary site of political gatherings. This image of the African American congregation as a social institution that confronts the social ills of poverty, illiteracy, and the legalized restrictions placed upon black humanity is well documented.

After the Civil War, typically, churches similar to First African started to take the role of the support institutions (e.g., mutual aid societies) that Black churches are known for today. After the Civil War, Black churches continued to be centers for learning and
support in their communities, a fact that G.S. Wilmore (1998) points out in his study of the early Black church:

By 1919, the Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, under Dr. L. K. Williams, had a membership of 8,743, forty-two departments and auxiliaries with 512 officers, and employed twenty-four staff persons. The 14,000-member Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, the largest black congregation in the world in its heyday, became internationally famous for its influence in labor relations, politics, housing, child care, and recreation. (p. 190)

Entering into the Post-World War II period, Black churches began to shape into more diverse and multidimensional institutions. During this period, there was an explosion of large Black churches. Even though not many of these churches grew into BMC status at a time when certain educated black clergymen who believed that the first responsibility of the church was to provide a ministry of social service for the needy (Wilmore, 1998), the Black church nevertheless began to visibly morph into a powerful influential institutional-type that the Black Megachurch has become.

Institutionalizing the Black church allowed for progression in a growing urban environment. According to Wilmore, “institutional-churches” effectively adapted to the pulse and rhythms of the cities as blacks arrived from the rural communities and/or the South, and as the urbanization and secularization processes accelerated (p. 190). Broadening and increasing the geographical areas where Black churches existed to include economic and political improvement provided for a formidable asset. Today, BMCs emulate mainstream culture where the Black church is increasingly removed from its historical role of guiding Black social life. Another way of illustrating that BMCs are in sync with the flow of development in the Black community—as well as the broader mainstream culture—is by pointing to the simultaneous increases in suburbanization of both middle-class Blacks and BMCs since the mid-1990s.
In his book titled, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (1994), C. Taylor (1994) attributes growth of congregations in cities such as Brooklyn to the influx of Blacks migrating from the South and their subsequent impact on the spread of the Holiness-Pentecostal churches among poor Blacks. Like BMCs today, these churches were known for providing an alternative to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), the African American Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), and the Baptist churches. The Pentecostal churches such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) churches in particular were able to provide support systems for Blacks migrating from the rural South. The rise of the “storefront” Pentecostal churches of the 1940s-50s has had profound influence in the creation of the BMC culture. The charismatic leadership and lavish spiritual uplift that are customary to BMCs today have a similar beginning that can also be viewed as parallel to the Holiness-Pentecostal churches in urban cities during the 1940s and 1950s.

Economic development and migration in large cities have given churches in urban areas the power and capital to fight for equality on behalf of their respective congregations and the broader Black community. Radicalism beyond the church walls helped provide a foundation for the creation of BMCs through heightened media attention and community engagement. The charismatic leadership of BMCs emerged from the long tradition in the Black church experience of provident innovative approaches to educating and preparing Blacks for tackling the oppression endured during the Jim Crow era. However, during the Civil Rights era, with the focus on upward mobility in urban centers just getting underway in the Black community, new and expanding Black churches that were largely comprised of middle-class congregants helped Blacks find
spiritual homes. This newfound financial stability of many established urban churches allowed them to worry less about the internal problem of members becoming destitute and to focus more on extending community services and fighting for civil rights (Johnson, as cited in Kusmer & Trotter, 2009). The financial stability of Black Churches solidified their impact on Black America. Not only did the churches provide religious guidance, they also became places for accumulating social capital, and promoting upward mobility in times of hardship. Urban clergy have had great influences on the current BMC culture due to the larger congregations that started to become customary in many of the nation’s larger cities due in part to the great migrations of Blacks. For example, in Philadelphia, by 1945, there were more than 400 Black churches in the city, including megachurches (1,000 or more members), large churches (500-999 members), medium size churches (200-499 members). Increased Black migration coupled with wartime prosperity led to a surge in medium-size, large, and megachurches (Johnson, as cited in Kusmer & Trotter, 2009). This increase of migration and monetary gain among Blacks, along with growing congregants, had allowed larger churches to gain greater respectability within and outside the Black community.

Bishop Sherrod C. Johnson, founder of an apostolic church in 1947, known as Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, is one of many prominent pastors prior to the 1980s who had a congregation that allowed the church to be considered a BMC. In October 1947, the church purchased the building of the Bethany Collegiate Presbyterian Church for $105,000; unfortunately, the building was completely destroyed by a fire in November 1958. Undeterred by the setback, Bishop Johnson immediately set out to build a one-story structure with a seating capacity of 3,500. The basement chapel
could accommodate 1,500 worshipers, church staff offices, a dining hall, a nursery, and a studio room for broadcasts (Banks, 1972). Not only has the church been a model and a prototype of today’s BMCs, but also churches such as Johnson’s were also instrumental in helping Blacks endure the social upheaval of the 1940s through the 1960s. Being aware of the growing secularization and usage of technology in the society, pastors such as Johnson used any tool at their disposal to reach Black people. For more than twenty years Bishop Johnson broadcasted from Philadelphia. In time, his sermons were taped and broadcasted to more than sixty other radio stations. More than ninety congregations, including three in the West Indies and one in Toronto, Canada, had sprung from the original congregation (Banks, 1972).

Arguably, many individuals who think about BMCs, tend to think more about size and expansion than about their positive contributions to the communities in which they are established. Prior to the 1980s, Blacks from working-class backgrounds and who were formerly un-churched but were later drawn to the church were primarily attracted to COGIC and the Black Pentecostal Holiness denominations. In 1938, COGIC had slightly more than 30,000 members in 733 churches, whereas the denomination claimed almost 400,000 members in 1960 and more than 5 million members in 1996 (Pinn, 2006). However, today’s Blacks from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and who were formally un-churched are increasingly attracted to non-denominational churches.

However, as Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) explain, “Both Holiness and Pentecostalism gained momentum in reaction to liberal tendencies at the turn of the century expressed in Darwinism, the ecumenical emphasis, and Social Gospel movement” (p. 79). Along with Bishop Johnson, other pastors who predate today’s BMC
leaders include Charles “Sweet Daddy” Grace and Rev. “Ike” Eikerenkoetter. The characteristics that many BMCs possess today, such as church expansion through satellite churches, community development programs, and the delegation of officials beyond their denominations, have their origins in the charismatic influences of the Pentecostal ministers of the early 20th century. It is because of these pastors that prosperity churches have begun to surface as contemporary megachurches. Charles “Sweet Daddy” Grace, the founder of The United House of Prayer for All People, was similar to today’s BMC leaders in that they all provide charismatic leadership with thunderous musical ministries and with active community involvement.

The Reverend Ike can be considered one of the fathers of Black Televangelism. Several times a month, Rev. Ike preached to capacity crowds in major cities. For instance, one month after his successful “International Healing and Blessing Meeting” at Madison Square Garden, he drew a crowd of 14,000 people to Atlanta’s Omni Arena where Mayor Maynard Jackson gave him a key to the city (Walton, 2009). Unlike the literature on Rev. Ike, the literature on Sweet Daddy Grace is sparse at best. Regarding current BMC pastors, Thomas Dexter “T.D” Jakes and Creflo Dollar are among those who use media technologies, self-help measures, empowerment mechanisms; and prosperity messages to attract more members in a manner similar to that of forerunners such as Rev. Ike and Daddy Grace.

To reiterate, large Churches prior to the 1980s can be considered the foundations of BMCs in America today. Earlier large Black churches and ministries that were either Town Churches or Tent Churches boasted massive attendance comparable to attendance in today’s BMCs. The ability to communicate via radio, television or the Internet has
allowed pastors to connect with the Black community collectively and more broadly. After WWII, the rural and urban clergy that engaged with Pentecostal Holiness denominations began to grow in size due in part to the migration of Blacks from smaller towns to the larger cities in order to experience a better chance for economic prosperity and measures of relief from the harshest forms of Jim Crow. The impact of the charismatic leaders who began the transition into using technological advancements such as radio and later television broadcasting started to gain attention, which eventually paved the way for BMCs of the 1980s. The conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement helped to provide a more representative government that allowed for more transparency and better treatment of all Americans, regardless of Race (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).

**Emergence of the New “BMC” of the 1980s**

Throughout the course of the 1960s, as has been documented, Black church attendance declined particularly during the Civil Rights Movement. Results taken from a Gallup Poll on church attendance during the 1960s showed that Black Protestants exhibited a steady decline throughout the nonviolent, King-dominated period of the revolution (Nelson and Nelson, 1975). By the early 1970s, however, the same Gallup (1975) line of inquiry showed an increase in comparison to attendance in 1967 and 1968.

In the late 1960s, Black church membership declined largely due to the more radicalization of Black youths who ascribed to the Black church a conservative interpretation of religion and the upholding of White-interpreted views of Christianity. However, by the late 1970s many Black churches had remodeled their prophetic and even somewhat liberation-theology gospel similarly to the Black Christian nationalism of Rev.
Albert Cleage and the Black Madonna (1987).\(^1\) With that reformulation, many Black youths returned to the Black church by the end of the 1970s.

With Civil Rights laws accepted and enforced, many Black churches, particularly those that became BMCs, pivoted to place a greater focus on prosperity gospel. Popularity of the term “megachurch” has grown significantly over the past 15 years. Prior to the 1980s, large churches had been considered just that: “large.” BMCs have not only garnered attention because of their size but also because of their influence within the Black community and in society at large. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Black church collectively went through periods of transition, where the role of the church became marginalized with respect to its influence on the lives of Black Americans. However, community empowerment in the post-Civil Rights period has had an influence on BMC growth. Today’s BMC growth and community engagement can be attributed partially to community development corporations (CDCs) that are often essential to successful community development efforts. Black churches across the country, beyond BMCs, have experimented with CDCs to revitalize their respective local communities, both urban and rural (Smith, 2003). Numerous activist Black churches with relatively large congregations independently charted CDCs as corporate nonprofit subsidiaries of their churches (Smith, 2003).

From 1980 to 1995, nine black church-associated CDCs were established among four majority-Black neighborhoods in four of New York City’s five boroughs: Harlem (Manhattan), South Jamaica (Queens), Bedford-Stuyvesant (Brooklyn), and Morrisania (Bronx). Among the earliest were CDCs rooted in ecumenism and collective action (Smith, 2003). However, like current BMCs, these earlier churches also formed

\(^1\) Note: This is only a plausible proposition that can be tested in other research.
ministerial alliances to accommodate and solve common problems that were hindering Black growth socially. In New York City, from the late 1970s and until the middle of the 1980s, multiple ministerial alliances emerged, such as the Metropolitan Ministers Conference and the African People’s Christian Organization (2003). Though it is not highly explored in this thesis, BMCs are starting to create their own alliances, which are much like the CDCs in New York. The formation of alliance-based Black church-associated CDCs suggests that the Black churches in the four neighborhoods maintained an appreciation for collective action.

In those predominantly Black geographical areas where CDCs were not as prominent, larger church congregations in today’s society have been able to fill the void. It was not until the 1990s—after the 1960s, leading into the 1980s, with the proliferation of mass mediated forms of religion—that the full shift to mainstream acceptance of what is referred to as neo-Pentecostal attributes began to take place (Walton, 2009). In the late 1980s, however, building on styles that began during the periods of the Great Black Migrations to the North and to urban areas, a new class of preachers emerged in the Black mainlines that bridged the class and cultural divide (Walton, 2009). What the churches of the 1980s were able to accomplish was their embodiment of the narratives of self-made men and women in America, particularly the BMCs, as a central part of the churches’ ethos of self-help theology. It is evident that the BMCs founded during the 1980s were created with distinct care, each with specific characteristics that would satisfy the congregants they all were trying to attract. In a Washington Post article written by Sudarsan Raghavan and Hamil R. Harris (2005), the authors refer to the development of
several BMCs, resulting from Black migration into Prince George’s County, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC:

Beginning in the early 1970s, as black parishioners in the District began moving to Prince George’s and urban land prices made expansion difficult, churches began to follow.

Some congregations moved into buildings abandoned by whites that had left for Southern Maryland. Others bought run-down shopping malls, theaters, department stores and conscience stores. Funded largely by their members, some have bought land without a mortgage.

Of those, several evolved in to some of the nation’s largest mega-churches, becoming magnets for worshippers across the region. They include Reid Temple, Jericho City of Praise Baptist Church, with 19,000 members and 11 properties covering 73.8 acres in Landover; and Evangel Temple, an arena-sized building on nearly 40 acres in Upper Marlboro. Metropolitan Baptist Church, one of the District’s largest, also has announced it will decamp to Prince George’s, in Largo (Section A p. 01).

BMC culture embodies strands from various Black denominations. Whether the church was located in rural, urban, or suburban neighborhood, without the predecessors of large Black churches that fulfilled the role of being the central institution in their communities through social programs, the current BMCs would not have had a model from which to learn and would thereby be less successful today.

**Current Status of BMC Growth**

Among the common perceptions if not common traits of BMCs are their community focus and friendly appeal to potential church members. BMC growth continues due to a sizable stratum of Blacks with increasingly higher socioeconomic status. Thumma and Bird (2008) argue that megachurches have larger percentages of young single congregants as well as a disproportionate share with higher levels of socioeconomic status than anyone who attends a Protestant church. Without growth, the church would not be able to sustain itself with the offering of many programs and
services. Kimberly Karnes, Wayne McIntosh, Irwin Morris, and Shanna Person-Merkowitz (2007) comment on this point:

Megachurches must have a permanent physical presence in their local communities. Churches, however large, that lack continuous (seven-day-a-week) control over their Sunday meeting place and its adjacent facilities are not, at least according to our criteria, megachurches. Churches that do not have their own facilities may be in a very different position vis-à-vis the community than churches with a physical home (and operations center). (p. 262)

Also, the social expectations and experiences can be understood as being more diverse than those of Blacks from working class—backgrounds, which is a characteristic that Gilkes (1998) notes:

Contemporary black Megachurches have usually grown quite rapidly, attracting quite a bit of attention and, occasionally, hostility in their communities. Although they are manifestly middle-class, their worship style reflects the older tradition of the Sanctified Church and other shouting churches (p. 104).

BMC growth today is the result, in part, of the recent growth of a solidly middle class of Blacks. Some BMCs have qualities that would put them under the term “Word Church.” In his article, Michael Tillotson (2010), explores the Word Church Formation in today’s Black church. First, he states, “In the case of Contemporary Black Christianity, we see that the religion is clearly ensconced in the Western paradigm of knowledge and culture, despite some elements that might be called retentions of African Culture” (p. 1020). In reference to the Word Church, Tillotson writes:

In mimicking the values of White Americans, the Word Church locates Black salvation in the material world. Consequently, the emphasis on the material message found in the Word Church is a threat to the internal security of African Americans. It distracts and distorts their theological and ancestral responsibility to fight oppression and inequality as well as provide communal help and inspiration to the poor and unfortunate. (p. 1027)

In recent decades, contemporary Black megachurches can be broadly characterized by their professional bureaucratic identification, suburban affiliation, and
charismatic neo-Pentecostal orientation (Walton, 2011). The BMC has created a formidable setting that is accommodating to the Black middle class whose modernized, urbane sophistication and high wage occupations have contributed to important and lasting impacts within their communities. Major Black churches formerly associated with the Civil Rights tradition of fighting racist structures have been challenged by BMCs with a new tradition of teaching believers to “go within yourself” and transcend limitations with the help of God (Barber, 2011). Their beliefs have started to reflect their forms of worship. BMCs have clearly engendered a reformulation of the Black Church Model. Where the Traditional Black Church (TBC) fails to both satisfy the growing diversity and to speak to the material aspirations of Black Americans, today’s BMCs have the resources and the orientation to provide adequate accommodations for those desires to be met. Literature on BMCs illustrates how this renewed emphasis on gifts of the spirit have, in many ways, reconfigured and blurred ecclesiastical hierarchies and denominational boundaries. Many megachurch ministries feel more comfortable affiliating with other religious bodies in which they believe there is spiritual affinity and shared theological vision (Walton, 2011). Religious affiliation forges social connectedness and dense, cooperative networks that allow members to practice such skills and generate social capital. In the rapidly growing suburbs and exurbs in which most megachurches are located, these ties are central to many people’s overall happiness and quality of life (Warf and Winsberg, 2010). Today’s BMCs, like earlier megachurches, offer a flexible consumerist approach to theology, which does not always center itself on the theological purity of the word.
The current BMC culture has been associated with the social gospel message/theology. In her study Sandra Barnes (2010b) reviews 16 sample BMCs and their usage of social gospel and community empowerment; 13 of the 16 Black megachurches espoused a Social Gospel theology as part of their broader church belief system. Furthermore, the survey results show that 87.4% of clergy believe that their churches have a social justice agenda and one-third (33%) of the congregations are frequently exposed to Liberation theologies during sermons. In regard to community empowerment, Barnes notes the following based on her survey:

Moreover, church size is not necessarily a deciding factor in understanding both the number and type of programs; several “smaller” megachurches sponsor relatively more community empowerment programs than their considerably larger counterparts. Those Black megachurches most involved in community empowerment initiatives offer the following types of programs: niche bible studies; CDCs; literacy initiatives; city-wide voter registration drives; neighborhood revitalization programs; low-cost housing and sub-divisions; prison re-entry ministries, food pantries; employment and training; Princeton Review courses; credit unions; daycare, aftercare, and eldercare programs; clothing stores; grocery stores; substance abuse programs; elder housing/care; health clinics; prison/jail ministry; schools; counseling centers; land acquisition; social issue advocacy; and HIV/AIDS programs and free-testing. (2010)

Without question, these social institutions were created to help uplift the social status of Blacks who gained little in comparison to the upward mobility of other African Americans. BMCs have had access to resources that had not been previously accessible to other black churches. Perhaps people today are more comfortable with bigness, more attracted to spectacle, or more drawn to a church in which they can choose to be anonymous, or in which they can choose between anonymity in a big crowd and intimacy in a small group (Chavas, 2006).

Throughout the 1990s to the present, there have been frequent articles published in newspapers and magazines on the rising impact that BMCs have on the Black
community. Many of these articles documented and informed the new trends of these types of churches. For example, *Ebony* magazine published an article written by Renita J. Weems (2005) that discusses the new trend of how neo-Pentecostal polity has helped form BMC culture today:

Many see the emergence of the Black mega-church and the Neo-Pentecostal renewal that have swept across denominational lines as the two most significant trends to take place in Black Church history in the last few decades.

A new class of Black social elites has emerged in recent years, who seem to welcome the updated twist on that “old time religion” (jubilant praise) combined with a message on how to gain a piece of the American Pie.

Neo-Pentecostalism has contributed to phenomenal church growth in urban areas where many conservative mainstream churches were dying, unable or unwilling to evangelize new, younger members….The success of [N]eo-Pentecostalist churches—which have found a way to combine a powerful mix of spiritual-filled worship with a message of Black empowerment—has prompted lots of debate in recent years about the nature and mission of the Black church. (p. 122)

The *Austin American-Statesman*, a Texas newspaper, published an article written by Juan R. Palomo (1996), which states that “church expansion” is a new trend in the black church culture. Furthermore, Palomo discusses the Church Praise Tabernacle, which was pastored by Dana Carson:

Opening for its first services on Easter Sunday, this $4 million house that Carson and his followers built at the corner of Martin Luther King Boulevard and U.S. 183 features an 1,800-seat sanctuary, an auditorium/gym, an elementary school, a day-care center, a theology school and administrative offices.

Today, Praise Tabernacle boasts some 1,000 members – about 15 percent of whom are either Hispanic or Anglo, according to church officials – with an average age of 27. Praise Tabernacle is not the largest black church in Austin. There are others as large or larger. And churches like Ebenezer Baptist and David Chapel remain home to many of the city’s black professional, business and political leaders. (p. A1)
BMCs, as they expand, become providers of multidimensional services to a larger church community. Churches such as Praise Tabernacle are providing innovative services that are appealing to the seekers of the BMC services.

Another significant trend that is found in BMC culture is the attention-seeking and eye-boggling tools being used to attracted more attendees. An example of this can be found in a church located in Texas named the Inspiring Body of Christ Church, or IBOC as it is commonly known. The pastor, Rickie Rush, with innovative thinking, is transforming what it means to be a part of a church community. In just nine years after the church was founded, an article written by Norma Adams-Wade (1999) was published in *The Dallas Morning News* about the impact this church and its pastor were having on the community.

“US” is the Inspired Body of Christ Church, which Mr. Rush founded in 1990. He is moving his more than 3,500 members from Pleasant Grove to southwest Oak Cliff. They have outgrown their 400-seat sanctuary and the extra 400-seat overflow space… The lesson learned from the beer marketers is evident throughout his plans for the move. He wants to create a sanctuary for young people- protecting them from drugs, violence and sex. He hopes to create a village so complete that members will choose to spend their time at church rather than in the world outside. (p. 37A)

Like many BMCs, the large churches in Texas have gone beyond the traditional missionary tactics to gain new members. In the mid-1980s, large Black congregations in Dallas, for instance, had begun to add or acquire facilities at a faster rate and to a wider extent. Nevertheless, family life centers that feature gymnasiums and social amenities still are uncommon in comparison with large White churches, according to Black church leaders. But more Black churches are seeing the value of these big projects and are finding ways to finance them (Adams-Wade, 1999).
Promoting self-help and empowerment is a paramount theme in the BMC tradition that is known for conveying messages of hope that “you will personally gain from your personal religiousness.” As noted in an article published in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, written by John Blake (1999), the BMCs promote such theologies, and therefore BMCs congregations have been experiencing an influx of new numbers recently despite their lack of collective accountability. The article states:

More mega-churches have at least 5,000 congregants and often four times that number—mean more political power for church. But the intimate style of worship that has been a mainstay within the black church is difficult to hold onto in mega-churches, some members say.

“You don’t really know everybody,” said Angella Christie, a member of New Birth, which has 23,000 members. “You feel like you’re more at a university, where there’s more responsibility for you to grow because one pastor can’t talk to 23,000 people.” (p. 1Q)

In 2004, an article was published in *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, which discussed the Wake Chapel Church pastored by John J. Wilkins Jr.:

The 3,336 seats are theater-quality—Assessed at $6.6 million, this church imparts success. And so, too, does the pastor’s message—the church’s 4,500 members are encouraged to participate in dozens of ministries intended to help them save money, buy a home, keep a healthy diet...The 71,267 square foot building has the usual classrooms, kitchen and fellowship hall. But then there are extras: a computer lab; a bookstore; and a private garage for the pastor, a confessed “car buff” who is proud of his 1929 Ford (Shimron, 2004 p. A1)

In recent news, the BMC culture has become the topic of a trend that has historically been a part of the Black church experience. More specifically, the topic of political influence has become a topic that many scholars find to be prominent in nature because of the recent political debates on whether or not pastoral influence and the megachurches in general have a powerful persuasion over the members who attend these churches. For example, an article in *The Associated Press & Local Wire* gives a recent and current
example of how BMCs’ impacts on politics amongst Blacks. With regard to a Black church in Chicago, the article discusses how the governor and the challenger both addressed the congregation of Salem Baptist Church or the “House of Hope.” The article notes that, the church, with its 10,000 seat arena, is led by Rev. James Meeks, a Democratic state senator whose focus is education and who attempted to run for Chicago mayor but dropped out of the race in order to ensure his community would support another Black candidate.² Rev. Meeks led several highly publicized school funding protests in 2008 at an affluent suburban Chicago school and at a Cubs game (Tareen, 2010). In their political capacity, while many megachurches are open-minded in their approach to theological issues and do not subscribe to narrow interpretations of Christian doctrine, most are politically conservative, although not all engage in overtly political behavior (Warf and Winsberg, 2010).

Conclusion

Chapter 1 has served to provide an informed perspective on the origins and contemporary issues of today’s BMC culture. Large Black churches prior to the 1980s, along with the help of Pentecostalism and the migration of Black Americans to urban cities, created atmospheres where charismatic spiritualists, Black pastors, became appealing to disassociated and un-churched Blacks who often originated from rural areas where town churches were prevalent, but who frequently migrated to large cities. It is because of this collective movement that churches were later created and allowed for more cooperation between denominational lines. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the Black church collectively underwent periods of transition, resulting in the church losing some of its gravitational force, and becoming somewhat marginalized in the lives

² Danny Davis, a Representative.
of Black Americans. But decades later, the Black church reemerged as documented by the increased number of Black megachurches.
Chapter 2

Statistical and Comparative Analysis of BMCs in America

Data for this chapter were primarily drawn from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (2005). From a list of 1,412 megachurches available on the Hartford Website, 211 are defined in this study as meeting the fourfold criteria identified in chapter one. These 211 BMCs have been organized according to various characteristics. Although, the Hartford data are six years old, those data are widely regarded as among the most respected and complete. Thus, unfortunately, there is a paucity of original studies and datasets addressing and documenting the size and detailed characteristics of megachurches. The data presented in this analysis, therefore, have limitations. Nevertheless, the Hartford list remains as one of if not the most authoritative list of megachurches in America today. The strengths of this study’s analysis of BMCs in America include the following: comparing BMCs by their denominational affiliation, by their geographical location, and by their impacts of recent North and South migration patterns that have helped fuel Southern BMCs.
Data and Summary of Statistics

The 2009 U.S. Black or African-American population totaled 38.9 million and represented 13% of the total population (Census Report, 2010). It is a common assumption that Blacks hold their religiosity in high regard. For example, according to the U.S. Religious Survey conducted in 2007, 87% of Blacks claim a formal religious affiliation (The Pew Forum, 2009). With 87% of the total Black population (38.9 million) claiming religious affiliation, this means that 33.8 million Blacks claim religious affiliation. Although there are nearly 863,000 BMC members, they represent only 2.6% of Blacks nationwide who claim religious affiliation. From the standpoint of the share of the Black religious population, BMCs are not that important in Black America today. However, BMCs appear to garner more attention through media and the affluence of their members than their size might warrant as a share of the total. What they lack in size with respect to percentage of the total, they possess in political and economic power. Leaders of BMCs have important political connections; many of their members are affluent and possess considerable social capital; and, therefore, these institutions can mobilize thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, around a given issue.

Factors that have helped large churches reach BMC status include migration and location. Metropolitan Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Houston house a disproportionate share of the nation’s BMCs. These three areas have also attracted a disproportionate share of Blacks undergoing a reverse migration from North to South over the past decade. Many have settled into suburbs of these metro areas rather than in the central city as during previous migrations, largely because they tended to have higher socioeconomic

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3 The true figure would be smaller so as to set aside children who obviously cannot claim religious affiliation.
status than the general Black population. Moreover, Blacks in these three metro areas have been moving from the central cities to local suburbs similar to the way Blacks are doing in other parts of the country. To grow their congregations, BMC clergy develop worship services that are appealing to potential future church members who are either in search of or open to prosperity theology. Organizing the empirical data of churches by denomination shows that BMCs are primarily evangelical. Out of the 211 BMCs, 48% are a part of a convention affiliated with the Baptist denomination, with a distant second having 24% non-denominational BMCs. The remaining 28% of this total includes the AME (4.7%), COGIC (3.8%), PAW (1.9), and UMC (1.9%) (see Table 2).

The distribution of BMCs by region and state breakdown shows that there is a higher concentration of BMCs in areas that are known to have a high concentration of minorities. Out of the 50 U.S. states, 30 had one or more churches that qualified as a BMC. The shifting migratory patterns of Blacks help explain the growing number of BMCs in specific metropolitan areas. Located in an urban and/or suburban area, the growing Black middle-class populations and their elevating aspirations have contributed to the popularity of the prosperity gospel.

The five states that have the highest concentration of BMCs are Texas (29 BMCs); Georgia (25 BMCs); Maryland (18 BMCs); California (15 BMCs); and Florida (13 BMCs) (see Table 3). States that did not have any BMCs were in some Northwestern, Upper Plains, and New England states. Such states include Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Maine, Rhodes Island, and Vermont.

Comparable to their predominantly White counterparts, namely, White megachurches (WMCs), BMCs are located in heavily populated areas that have been or

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4 American Baptist, Baptist General Conference, Missionary Baptist, National Baptist, Progressive Baptist
are in the process of being urbanized. To attract more attendees, megachurches primarily flourish in top-tier urban areas, such as Illinois, Texas, and Georgia. A study on megachurches in America conducted by Warf and Winsberg (2010) provides data on this issue:

The distribution of US mega churches among counties points to both their metropolitan orientation and tendency to locate in the South and West. Thus, Southern California figures prominently, including Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, which collectively contain 128 mega churches and 530,000 attendees. Similarly, metropolitan areas with eight or more mega churches apiece included Seattle (17 churches and 48,000 attendees), Dallas-Ft. Worth (45 and 148,000), Houston (42 and 210,000), Miami-Ft. Lauderdale (12 and 53,000), Atlanta (46 and 196,000), Chicago (36 and 141,000), Detroit (12 and 55,000), Minneapolis-St. Paul (14 and 52,000), and Philadelphia (8 and 31,000). (p.41)

Based on congregational size alone, from the Warf and Winsberg study, only one BMC, namely, West Angeles Church of God in Christ, founded in 1943, was on the list of the ten largest megachurches in the United States.

Based on congregational size alone, for this study, eight out of the top twelve BMCs are located in southern states. The other four are located in distinctly heavily populated areas in the Midwest and the West (see Table 4). Also, seven out of this twelve were founded prior to the 1980s. Older and more established metropolitan areas facilitated the growth of churches, which existed prior to the 1980s, to ultimately reach BMC status with their adoption of a prosperity gospel.

The geographical landscape of BMCs is linked to the migration patterns of Blacks to huge metropolitan locations with socioeconomic positions that are able to both help give rise to and support BMC culture. According to the U.S. Census (2008), the distribution and level of household incomes by state shows both Georgia and Texas have median incomes of approximately $50,000 a year. In the state of Georgia, there is an
estimated 118,420 people who attend a BMC, and in the state of Texas there is an estimated 127,157 people who attend a BMC.

In 2008, there was an estimated total of 2,907,944 Blacks living in the state of Georgia and 2,898,143 Blacks living in the state of Texas; making them third and fourth respectively, in terms of states with the largest Black populations (U.S. Census, 2008). Assuming that 87% of Blacks in these two states claim religious affiliation consistent with the rate of the national Black population, the rates at which Blacks attend BMCs in Georgia and Texas are nearly twice the rate at which Blacks on the whole in the United States attend BMCs. That is, 2.6% of Blacks claiming religious affiliation attend BMCs nationally, whereas 4.1% of religious Blacks attend BMCs in Texas and 4.4% attend BMCs in Georgia.

Migration’s Influence on BMC Growth

Migration has remained an important factor in the ability of a church to reach BMC status. In the past decade, states such as Georgia and Texas have experienced in-migration of large numbers of Blacks who are moving to some of their suburban and metropolitan areas of these states. In 2009, Frey, Berube, Singer, and Wilson, in their study shined a revealing light on Blacks and Whites moving to the South:

The black population is in the midst of its second straight decade of a large scale southward shift. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s as smaller streams, the “return to the South” movement of blacks has been a major migration flow since 1990. The movement includes both young and old blacks (including retirees), as well as both professional and blue collar blacks. This movement has helped to drive black population gains in several New South metropolitan areas, led by Atlanta, the dominant destination for this group. Many Southern metropolitan areas, especially those outside of Texas and Florida, are still heavily dominated by black and white populations, despite the emergence of Hispanics as a growing minority. (p. 13)
An increase in the number of Blacks migrating has allowed large churches in the metro areas of the south to achieve BMC status because these areas are currently experiencing more prosperity and growth than northern metros. The data show the areas that have experienced increased migration of Blacks have more BMCs located in close proximity of the growing Black-populated cities. As shown in Table 3, there are an estimated 25 BMCs that are located in Georgia. Of those, a total of 22 are located in the Atlanta metro area. In Texas, there are an estimated 29 BMCs. Of those, a total of 10 are located in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, and 14 are located in the Houston metro area.

In his analysis of the 2010 Census Report, Frey (2010), supports the argument that there are specific southern metropolitan areas that have witnessed the influx of Blacks in their areas. In regard to the Atlanta, Frey explains:

Atlanta also far surpassed other metropolitan areas in its black population gain during the 2000s. Its large middle-class black population, along with its diversified and growing economy, provided a continued draw for African Americans from across the country. Nine of the top 10 metro areas for black population gains from 2000 to 2008 are located in the South, including the three “New South” areas of Charlotte, Orlando, and Tampa. These regions are attracting more highly-educated blacks, including those from northern destinations. Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and Dallas rank sixth, ninth, and 25th, respectively, on the share of black adults with a bachelor’s degree, whereas Philadelphia and Detroit rank, respectively, 59th and 79th. (p. 57-58)

The “New South,” as Frey refers to the region, is increasingly better educated and comprises both more northerners and more middle-class and suburban Blacks. In his analysis of the 2010 Census report, Frey also observes that the South is on a course of steadily absorbing larger numbers of northern Blacks. In his report titled, State of

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5 College Park, GA; Decatur, GA, East Point, GA; Jonesboro, GA; Lilburn, GA; Lithonia, GA; Macon, GA; Marietta, GA; Norcross, GA; Redan, GA; Stone Mountain, GA; Smyrna, GA.
Metropolitan America, Frey (2010) explains changes in Black population growth in the
North versus the South:

The region’s share of total U.S. black population continued to rise from 54 percent in 1990 to 57 percent in 2008. The South accounted for fully 75 percent of the nation’s black population gains from 2000 to 2008, up from 65 percent in the 1990s. Northern destinations for blacks during the Great Migration still figure prominently among the metropolitan areas with the largest black populations in 2008, as do several areas in the South. The biggest shift occurred in metropolitan Atlanta, which rose rapidly from seventh in 1990 to fourth in 2000, and in the 2000s surpassed Chicago to house the second-largest African American population in the United States. (p. 57)

The economic impetus behind the “Mass Movement” of Blacks today is similar to the Great Black Migrations during the World War eras, periods when Blacks migrated in large numbers to increase their life chances of opportunities for economic prosperity.

The prosperity gospel of BMCs meets and reinforces the aspirations of upwardly mobile Blacks. The historic clustering of African Americans and the continued growth of the overall population have led to numerous suburban areas in the South becoming “majority-minority,” which is now the case for 17 metropolitan areas, up from 14 in 2000 and just 5 in 1990 (Frey, 2010). Majority-minority communities are simply a manifestation of the North to South migration.

**Education’s Influence on BMC Growth**

The level of educational attainment of Black clergy has been increasing right along with the educational attainment level of Blacks on the whole. According to the Census Bureau, 19% of Blacks 25 and older had a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2009 (U.S. Census, 2009). In 2008, the number of degrees awarded to Blacks showed: 95,702 Associate’s degrees; 152,457 Bachelor’s degrees; 65,062 Master’s degrees; 3,906 Doctoral degrees, and 6,400 First-Professional degrees (U.S. Census, 2011). The degree
credentials have enabled Blacks to climb into middle-class occupations. And, like other ethnic groups, many Blacks aspired to even higher levels of socioeconomic status. These are the Blacks who are more open to prosperity gospels of BMCs.

BMCs are able to provide spiritual foundations for the newly educated through proper training. Clergy who are proficient in using technological advancements are able to connect with urbane, tech-savvy churchgoers. For example, in general, in 2003, research from *Your Church* showed pastors were far more educated than the typical American adult. The author cited in 2003, that 92% of pastors had an undergraduate degree and 7 out of 10 had already earned either a master's degree (55%) or a doctorate (14%) (LaRue, 2003).

**BMCs and Metropolitan Areas**

Some of America’s largest megachurches (WMCs and BMCs) are located in the Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta metropolitan areas. Georgia and Texas have the highest concentrations of BMCs. As shown in Table 3, there are nine major U.S. cities that have five or more BMCs located in or near the surrounding area. These cities include Atlanta, with 15; Houston, with 14, and Dallas-Fort Worth with 10. Metropolitan areas include Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta in Georgia and both the Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington and Houston-Sugar land-Baytown areas in Texas. Growth in the overall population of these metro areas has resulted from a widespread migration of people moving into adjacent counties that are in close proximity to each particular city. Counties surrounding Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston have gradually become a reflection of the increased diversity and economic opportunity caused by migration into the neighboring counties.
The establishment of and the prosperity in a BMC, rely heavily on the migration into the metropolitan areas.

The Great Black Migrations around World Wars I and II were driven primarily by two factors: economic aspirations of prosperity and socio-political aspirations of freedom. The principal reasons for Black North-South migrations today is economic aspiration of prosperity as the South continues to attract growing shares of both public and private investments. However, it is worth noting that Blacks would not be migrating to the South in numbers witnessed today if the region was anywhere near as demonstrably racist as it was in the early 20th century. As an important indicator of declining southern racial antagonism over the years, there has been a marked decline in segregation of southern cities; something northern cities such as Milwaukee, Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago are unable to claim.

Conclusion

Megachurches have been able to flourish because of specific conditions such as increases in educational degrees held by both pastors and congregants in both BMCs and WMCs. As well as the implementation of innovated worshipping techniques such as the use of prosperity gospel to attracted the un-churched, the urbane, the educated, and the sections of the youth under the Christian faith. Having an educated clergy and staff who speak in discourses resonating with their sensibilities has become a growing expectation of young black church members.

The gradual increase in the number of people in southern metro areas has been a stimulus for economic growth in the cities. The growing diversity in major U.S. cities has allowed BMCs to successfully gain members through methods of poaching, engaging
the un-churched, merging smaller churches, and appealing to the increased number of Blacks migrating to states such as Georgia and Texas. Poaching, which has allowed some BMCs success in persuading members of one church to start attending a given BMC is particularly notable. It has allowed BMCs the resources to attract and engage the un-churched with their daily community programs and expansion into neighboring counties, which has subsequently allowed a few BMCs the support to merge or open up a satellite church that is tuned into the main site.
Chapter 3

Four Strategies for BMC Growth

In chapter 1, this study asserts that BMCs grew to their large size via four strategies: (1) Poaching other church members, (2) engaging the un-churched, (3) merging of smaller churches, and (4) migrating to locations where there was a cultural mass of upwardly mobile Blacks with high socioeconomic status. This study argues the position that without relying on extensive application of a combination of these four strategies, BMCs would not have been able to reach their high status. BMC clergy provide innovated approaches for an individual to obtain spiritual growth. BMC clergy, like WMC clergy, are trained in specific areas designed to maximize the use of formal techniques required to guide megachurch congregations to their “personal” religious freedom and increasingly as a pathway to “prosperity.” Chapter 2 provides information regarding the locations, numbers, size, and characteristics of BMCs as referenced in various studies. Chapter 3 analyzes the four strategies for BMC growth as this study asserts.
BMCs Growth Through Innovation

For a variety of reasons, and likely unwittingly, churches determine what combination of the four strategies will be pursued. Existence in this Information Age means that increased use of the Internet is a vital aspect in the growth of a BMC. Out of the 211 BMCs discussed in chapter 2, only five do not have an active webpage. Technological advancements, multiple ministries, community faith-based initiatives, community services, and socioeconomic advancement of congregation members are all used to elevate attendance in a BMC. Providing sermons, scripture readings, hymns via PowerPoint displayed on jumbotrons; streaming live church services via the Internet; and automated courtesy calls updating church members on current church events are just a few ways BMC pastors seek to both serve and grow their congregations. The usages of these media are to attract any person in pursuit of a church home to come visit.

For many BMCs, the use of technology has become part of the worship services. Contemporary megachurches that were either recently built or renovated are now equipped with the technology used in corporations and college classrooms. Huge projection screens or jumbotrons similar to major sports arenas have contributed to BMCs’ appeal to a young people. In their study of BMCs in relation to technology, Martin, Bowles, Adkins, and Monica (2011) provide information on the influence the Internet has on the theological teachings and social outreach efforts in these churches—all of whom having utilized digital resources such as websites, texting, and blogging to reach individuals beyond the physical locations of their congregations.

In an era when the media are competing for the hearts and minds of would-be worshippers, it is critical that preaching retains its vitality and attraction as an art form.
People today are video-orientated. They not only listen to the music, they also watch it on TV (Stewart, 1994). Being able to understand and adapt to this growing trend, BMC pastors employ supersized “instruments” to satisfy the perceived desires of potential new members. The innovative use of state-of-the-art, if not cutting-edge, technology in a church format contributes to the church’s ability to stay in tune with the social zeitgeist in relation to the Black community.

**Poaching**

Poaching is a strategy used when a BMC persuades members of other churches to switch their church membership to the BMC. Some churches—some with relatively large congregations—have witnessed their congregation decline in size while the BMC congregations grow larger. Some of those who leave their church become un-churched but a significant share switch their membership to BMCs. Progressive church policies that are typical in megachurches include reorganizing church objectives and agendas to attract unsatisfied church members from other churches. A combination of fostering material culture with religious practices has helped BMCs construct lavish church buildings, which attract potential new members. Typically, churches that have as few as 200 members have an annual budget of around $100,000, while megachurches generate an average of $6 million or more annually (Thumma & Bird, 2008). BMCs, like WMCS, have more revenue that can be spent to provide more diverse programs that a small church will be unable to match, which has potential to attract new members to a BMC. Barbara Coleman (2002) explains how churches appeal to new members; she recognizes that the relationship between the church and potential members must be mutually beneficial. The exchange relationship is a process that consists of steps that help attract
potential members: (1) understanding what members value, (2) creating programs in response to this market demand, (3) and providing empowering information. BMCs recognize that in appealing to non-members, they must design services that are non-threatening and entertaining. In order to engage everyone, BMC clergy design services to appeal to the un-churched as well as those with existing church membership, and include contemporary music, dance, and drama (Colman, 2002). Attraction to a BMC is the first priority to the clergy. This priority can be for both purely selfish reasons, say for example, more money in church offerings as well as for the clergy and his or her church staff to experience satisfaction in believing that they are reaching and spiritually nurturing many more souls.

Potential members are persuaded to leave their church for a particular BMC primarily because of its programs and its dedication to activities in the local community. Through different weekly church programs and the usage of prosperity gospels, poached members who join a BMC are assured satisfaction both spiritually and materialistically. The multiple church community service outreach programs provided by BMCs allow members and the greater community to use the churches’ facilities for other programs, thereby providing a thriving Christian environment. Coleman (2002), in her study of how churches attract new members, notes that many churches have multiple church programs designed for different categories of church members. According to her study, 54% of the respondents aged 36 to 55 valued youth programs; 57% of the respondents aged 18-35 valued adult education programs; and 66% of the respondents over 56 years of age valued musical programs. Providing a fulfillment for every age and possibly every social class group can persuade members of smaller churches that do not have the capital
to provide such services to leave for a BMC. Poaching members is the result of BMCs being able to provide services that appeal to the general public. Allowing for diversity among their members helps BMCs attract different types of people with varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The programs provide opportunities for groups of members to network and forge personal bonds outside of worship. As Snow, Bany, Peria, and Stobaugh (2010) point out “The main objectives of these small groups is to build connections and develop or maintain *esprit de corps*” (p. 177). BMC growth can be ensured only if new attendees are satisfied with their spiritual experiences at the megachurch. Existing church members are important in the maintenance of the BMC because they help engage and sometimes encourage the un-churched to attend church services. Churchgoers who place high values on intimacy, the continuation of local traditions, and attachment to kinship are not the people who tend to be attracted to BMCs.

**Engaging the Un-churched**

Engaging the un-churched is a strategy used by BMCs to attract believers who are not regular churchgoers or have never even attended church services. The un-churched Black population living around a BMC is potentially a future source of new members. If the church has a solid reputation and the innovative spiritual marketing techniques to persuade someone to visit the church as a guest, that is a prescription for BMC growth. Without the existing members being continually engaged in an active recruitment mode, the church could not expect growth. Congregations where adults 50 years old and under comprise 20% or less of active adult participation are most likely to grow (Hadaway, 2006). This points to the fact, that would-be BMC members tend to join congregations heavily comprised of church members aged 50 and under. Being able to adapt to the
rapidly growing technological era contributes to BMC success with younger un-churched individuals. Among congregations that strongly agreed that they were willing to change to meet the new church challenges, 45% experienced growth between the years 2000 to 2005 (Hadaway, 2006). In an effort to engage the un-churched, especially the youth, existing church members provide the best type of marketing: word of mouth. Results for the source of information respondents’ used when choosing to visit a church found that, 49% of first visits were initiated by friends and relatives, 11% of the same age cohort (46-55) used the Internet (Colman, 2002). The reason why BMCs often focus on the younger un-churched section of the un-churched population is largely for the same reasons that corporate marketers focus on younger populations for potential customers and clients. Older people are less persuaded to pursue different courses of actions or fundamentally alter their lifestyles.

The prosperity gospel BMCs are known to invest more revenue in efforts to help continue the programs and services likely to attract new converts, including the poached. Obtaining more visitors can simply involve follow-up courtesy calls or emails being sent on behalf of the church, which involves inviting individuals back to other events beyond next Sunday’s worship service. Because of their membership size, the work of individual members on behalf of the church makes for a lighter load for the clergy, and increased feelings of belonging among members. Therefore, according to Reynolds (2005), “the megachurches may become mega by creating an environment where previously rejected ‘free riders’ from other religions felt welcome and engendered feelings of belonging as a response to feelings of previous alienation” (p. 7). In order to appeal to the un-churched as well as the poached, megachurches design services to encourage individuals to
eventually join. The differences between smaller churches and larger churches of BMC caliber are primarily that smaller churches are close-knit family-oriented whereas megachurches are individualized in their pursuit of assuring that each member’s spirituality and prosperity. There are “seeker services” that serve to allow new(er) members to attend services without the expectation of participation. Later, there are “believer” services in which greater participation is expected (Reynolds, 2005). The appeal of community outreach resides in the type of programs offered to people outside the church. To encourage members and non-members, BMCs understand that “being in touch with the needs of people in the larger community is essential to knowing what kinds of programs will appeal to them” (Stewart, 1994, p.119). Consumerism has transformed the criteria the public uses to evaluate social and religious institutions. In relationship to BMC growth, prosperity theologies encourage donations from non-members as well the acquisition of small churches that are dwindling both in membership, finances, and also the acquisition of a number of independent institutions.

**Merging of Smaller Churches**

Mergers occur when a BMC decides to take control of one or more smaller congregations and integrate them into its own congregation. Some BMCs are partially a culmination of cobbling together smaller churches into a large BMC. As it relates to BMC growth, there are three types of mergers: (1) Shared, (2) Rebirth, and (3) Alliance. BMCs that engage in this overall strategy obtain a large number of new congregation members through the acquisition of the closing church.

Shared mergers occur when BMCs use another organization’s facility or the BMC might rent their facility out to other organizations that have no affiliation with the BMC.
directly. For example, a college campus ministry could be a type of shared merger with the college and the BMC. Even though the campus ministry has its own facilities it is still part of the megachurch. Towards the goal of increasing church attendance and reaching larger and larger audiences, pastors of Black megachurches purposefully have invested in online outreach to bring the Gospel message to individuals beyond the confines of local geography. For example, the Houston Metro area is a “Mecca” for megachurches to become involved with shared mergers, regardless of their racial make-up of potential participants. BMCs located in the Houston area that espouse shared mergers include the New Light Christian Center Church (NLCCC), pastor by Bishop I.V. Hilliard, who, according to the church’s website, four years before establishing NLCCC, had been pastoring a denominational church called New Light Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. Because of his teachings, he was able to establish a new church, which has the motto: “one church in different locations” as Bishop Hilliard has four church campuses around the metro of Houston. Other examples in Texas include the Higher Dimension Church pastored by Terrance H. Johnson who, according to the church’s website, opened the doors of the church on January 23, 1999 at the Judy Bush Elementary School; his membership has grown to more than 12,000. The Church Without Walls, pastored by Ralph D. West, who, according to the church’s website, opened its doors in 1987, initially at a Brookhollow Marriot Hotel.

Rebirth mergers occur when a BMC acquires a smaller church and connects it to the main church. For example, satellite churches are like annex college campuses to the BMC, and are often near cities. Multiple satellite churches often use technological devices to stream live sermons as well as provide information to members about current
church events. Using innovative technology also has allowed BMCs to reach members that have moved away from the main church. To protect their members, satellite churches allow members to be part of the senior pastor’s ministry and his networks that support the members around the United States—and sometimes with BMCs internationally. There are many examples of churches that have or are satellite churches of a larger BMC. In the Atlanta area alone, examples of rebirth mergers include BMCs such as the World Changers Ministries whose pastor, Creflo Dollar, according to the church’s website, opened up their 13th satellite church in April 2011, in Kansas City, Missouri. The New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, whose pastor, Bishop Eddie Long, according to the church’s website, has a host of affiliated churches and with two satellite churches being constructed currently. The Faith Christian Center, pastored by Joel Gregory, whose church is both a BMC and the satellite church of Word of Faith International Christian Center in Southfield, Michigan, under the leadership of its founder, Bishop Keith A. Butler and his wife, Pastor Deborah L Butler.

Alliance mergers occur when a small congregation joins with an established BMC in order to revive itself and its members. These smaller churches often conclude that they can best meet their religious institutional objectives by uniting with a successful BMC. Examples of this type of merger are sister/daughter churches that act as their own entities but are still part of the main BMCs’ church worship via live Internet feeds and clerical work. These churches often do not take on the name of the BMC but are still part of the ministerial alliance. For example, a Dallas area BMC that espouses mergers or being part of a ministerial alliance is The Potter’s House, pastored by T.D. Jakes, who according to
the church’s website is part of the Higher Ground Always Abounding Assemblies, Inc., which is based in Columbus Ohio.

**Migration Patterns of Black Americans**

The migration patterns of an increasingly large number of affluent and educated Black Americans have helped increase the number of BMCs in America. As stated in Chapter 1, the influx of Blacks to the North during the Great Black Migration contributed to the creation of large churches amongst urbanized Blacks in Chicago, New York, and Detroit. However, this migration has reversed in the past 20 years. The new Black migration is a return to Southern metropolitan areas. In order to ensure growth, BMCs have to start their congregation in an area where there is a large enough market of potential congregants to attract. According to Larry Mamiya (2006), there are several factors that stand out in the Black reverse migration. College-educated African Americans disproportionately led the new migration into the South. Georgia, Texas, and Maryland attracted the most Black college graduates from 1995 to 2000, while states like New York suffered the greatest loss. The middle-class, well-educated African Americans are the ones moving to the South. In their research Frey, Berube, Singer, and Wilson (2009) explore the reverse migration trends of Blacks moving to the South. BMCs have been able to use the migration as a strategy for experiencing growth by successfully acquiring smaller churches that are dwindling in neighboring cities and wooing the unchurched or newly migrated Blacks to the South. The Black population is in the midst of its second straight decade of a large-scale southward shift. Frey et al. note that, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s as a small stream of Blacks started to migrate, the “return to the South” movement of Blacks had become a major migration flow by the
1990s. The movement includes both young and old Blacks, retirees and new job entrants, as well as both professional and blue-collar Blacks. Migration has also helped attract new members to BMCs whose prosperity gospel is a central theme in their church. BMCs have advantages in comparison to smaller churches because they are more likely to influence a non-member with their prosperity messages, attractive designs, and uniquely diverse community programs.

Conclusion

BMCs have grown to their large size by utilizing the four strategies identified in this thesis. The combined use of these strategies has allowed BMCs to balance the spiritual and social needs of their members. Members remain active in the church and invite friends and family members as guests during service. The dedication of existing members and the formidable infrastructure of the BMC to which they belong, help persuade people to leave smaller churches and become members of the BMC. The lavish prosperity gospel of BMCs facilitates the higher revenues BMCs are accustomed to receiving on an ongoing basis. To increase in size even more, BMCs then use merger methods, which they absorb same smaller churches. The reason BMCs are able to experience such comprehensive growth is partially attributable to the migration of educated and middle-class Blacks moving back to the South where the highest concentration of BMCs are located. Since the growth of BMCs occurred around the same time of huge North to South migration flows, more rigorous research is required to tease out more precise degrees to which North to South migration flows are responsible for BMC success. Without doubt, however, BMCs grow because they understand what their members value; they are able to create programs in response to those values; they
use innovative technology when providing information; and more to the point, they deliver programs that are targeted to satisfy different sectors of the community.
Conclusion/Recommendations

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s of the post-Civil Rights era, the Black church collectively went through numerous and nonlinear transitions, where the role of the church lost some of its gravitational force and became marginalized in the lives of many Black Americans. As the transition from “Large” churches to “Mega” churches stemmed from the increase in the size of the educated Black middle class, their upward mobility allowed them to reconnect and fundamentally redefine the Black church model. Today’s BMC clergy, like their predecessors, who preached a prosperity gospel via radio and television broadcasts, understand the power and influence the technologies provide for generating new listeners and enlivening sermons of prosperity.

To provide an explanatory and analytical foundation for answering the question of how BMCs have been able to flourish in specific conditions and cities. This research has preliminarily examined the location and demographics of areas that have recently begun experiencing an increase in the number of Blacks migrating to their areas and has compared this phenomenon to the number of BMCs located in the same geographical area. The growing diversity in major U.S. cities has allowed BMCs to successfully gain members through strategies of poaching, engaging the un-churched, merging smaller
churches, and appealing to the increased number of Black migrants to specific cities. The gradual increases of Blacks migration have stimulated economic growth for metro areas especially in the South. The monetary resources available to BMCs in these growing economies help attract and engage the un-churched by providing daily community programs. The dedication of existing BMC members helps to persuade people to leave the smaller churches they attend and become members of BMCs. BMC clergy are also able to focus more attention on engaging the un-churched through community programs and faith-based initiatives due to large endowments provided by the church members and anonymous supporters.

The implementation of innovated worshipping techniques and the clergy’s prosperity gospels have facilitated the church’s ability to attract a full spectrum of potential members, from the un-churched to the urbane. These innovative techniques support the strengths of an educated clergy and staff who speak in discourses resonating with the sensibilities of college-educated Blacks of all ages, but particularly the young. Today, BMCs in the 21st century exist and continue to grow because they understand what their members value. Thus, BMCs understand that in order to attract new members a church has to be willing to adjust to the trends in society. High levels of BMC revenue and investment allow these institutions to create programs in response to common needs and novel desires of new, existing, and potential members. BMCs are the reflections of Black clergy preaching prosperity gospels combined with society’s expectations of contemporary worship in the Christian faith.

This study on the emergence and growth of Black megachurches is explanatory; it set out to identify potential factors that facilitated the growth and success of BMCs at the
start of the 21st century. My study sought to identify factors and clarify each of the four factors identified as having contributed to the continuation of BMC success and growth since the early 1990s. Future studies should be pursued to test the propositions regarding these four factors, using empirical data gathered from surveys and structured interviews with BMC Clergy and members.
References


Calhoun-Brown, A. (1998). While marching to Zion: Otherworldliness and racial


in the Internet age: Exploring theological teachings and social outreach efforts. 


List of Tables

Table 1: Size Distribution of BMCs in America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>No. of Churches</th>
<th>% of BMCs</th>
<th>Total Attendees</th>
<th>% of Attendees</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 2,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<td>91</td>
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<td>3,000-3,999</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>211</td>
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<td>862,990</td>
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Table 2: Denominational Affiliation of BMCs in America

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<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of BMCs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal</td>
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<td>African Methodist Episcopal Zion</td>
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<td>Baptist (Collectively)</td>
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<td>48.8</td>
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<td>Christian Methodist Episcopal</td>
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<td>Church of Christ</td>
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<td>1 (.94)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church of God, Anderson</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (.94)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church of God in Christ</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disciples of Christ</td>
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<td>1 (.94)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
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<td>Pentecostal Assemblies of the World</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pentecostal (Unspecified)</td>
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<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
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<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Methodist Church</td>
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<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Pentecostal Church International</td>
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<td>1 (.94)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown Affiliation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Table 3: State Breakdown of BMCs

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<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total # of BMCs</th>
<th>% of Total BMCs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<td>Connecticut</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
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<td>6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>5.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Kansas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
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<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>New York</td>
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<td>North Carolina</td>
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<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
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<td>Washington, D.C.</td>
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<td>Wisconsin</td>
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**Totals: 30 States**  
211  
100.0
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Name</th>
<th>Name of Pastor</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Ave. # of Attendees</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Angeles Church of God</td>
<td>Charles Blake</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>COGIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ The Potter's House</td>
<td>T.D Jakes</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Non-Denom. Baptist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopewell Missionary Baptist</td>
<td>William Sheals</td>
<td>Norcross, GA</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Changers Ministries</td>
<td>Creflo Dollar</td>
<td>College Park, GA</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Non-Denom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Light Christian Center</td>
<td>J.V Hillard</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>13,500</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Non-Denom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Birth Missionary Baptist</td>
<td>Eddie Long</td>
<td>Lithonia, GA</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>1987</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of Faith International</td>
<td>Keith Butler</td>
<td>Southfield, MI</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Non-Denom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Center</td>
<td>John Hunter</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>AME</td>
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<tr>
<td>First African Methodist</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Episcopal Church City of</td>
<td>Noel Jones</td>
<td>Gardena, IL</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>PAW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuge Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater Saint Stephen Full</td>
<td>Paul Morton</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>1937</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gospel Baptist Ebenezer AME</td>
<td>Grainger Browning</td>
<td>Ft. Washington</td>
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<td>1856</td>
<td>AME</td>
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<td>Milton Hawkins</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>COGIC</td>
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