

VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES: THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN IN NONDENOMINATIONAL MINISTRY  
AND HOW THEY NEGOTIATE POWER

by

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**DEDICATION**

In loving memory of my father,

Joseph Simpson.

April 10, 1934-May 25, 2012

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
ABSTRACT .....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Literature Review .....	4
Feminist Perspective on Women in Ministry.....	21
Research Questions .....	29
II. METHODOLOGY .....	31
III. FINDINGS.....	37
Types of Speakers .....	37
Why Nondenominational? .....	41
Identity and Perception of Roles .....	50
Present Day Challenges: Naming Oppression .....	71
Becoming a Minister .....	96
IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	104
APPENDIX SECTION.....	113
REFERENCES.....	118

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Participant Demographics .....	35
2. Participant Demographics Continued .....	36
3. Typology of Speakers According to Gendered Challenges .....	40

## **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on the experiences of African American women in nondenominational churches, and how they negotiate power within the historically male-dominated church structure. Although the nondenominational church movement is growing rapidly, little scholarship exists that seeks to understand women ministers in general and even less about African American women in nondenominational ministries in particular. The issue of power within the context of gender relations in the Black church remains a contentious landscape where patriarchal structures are maintained as a community standard for African Americans as a group, and then internalized and recreated at the personal level. By examining Black women's religious involvement in nondenominational church structures, this research seeks to place Black women at the center of analysis to reveal the many ways leadership is practiced and to redefine power using their situated knowledge and experiences. Findings from this research reveal that despite the fact that clergywomen in nondenominational churches still encounter religious sexism, they have been successful in establishing their own churches and breaking gender barriers within the church. Thus, nondenominational ministries are either a potential site for a paradigm shift toward empowerment to end sexism for African American women in ministry (and potentially Black women as a whole), or a site to perpetuate patriarchal oppression.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him<sup>1</sup>  
(Loewenberg 1976:236).

Religion has been and is a very important and contentious issue in the United States. In 2008, 56 percent of Americans age 18 and older and an even higher number of African Americans (79 percent) report that religion is very important in their lives (Sahgal and Smith 2009). The Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2008) finds that women are more religious than men (63 percent of women and 49 percent of men). The numbers are higher still for African American women with 84 percent reporting that religion is important to them and who have the highest weekly church attendance, more than any other ethnic group (Sahgal and Smith 2009). Since the majority of the U.S. and an even larger number of blacks<sup>2</sup> (87 percent) report religious affiliation, it makes sense that black women would seek admission into leadership positions within the clergy (Sahgal and Smith 2009). In general, female senior pastors in Protestant churches have risen from 5 percent in the 1990s to 10 percent in the year 2009 (The Barna Group 2009). However, traditional gender roles and religious doctrine have proven to be obstacles to black women in leadership roles in proportion to their numbers as congregants.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech at the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> The terms African Americans and black will be used interchangeably throughout the duration of this paper.

Historians and theologians understand that although women have been denied the role of pastor, as gained through ordination, historical accounts record the tradition of female preachers and religious leaders dating back to 1740 (Brekus 1998). Even though women have been excluded from ordination, they have not been absent from establishing, leading, and participating in the formation and continuation of Protestant denominations (Dodson 2002; Gilkes 1985; Kwilecki 1987). Nondenominational congregations are churches that are not affiliated with any particular denomination or bound by a centralized belief system, and they are free of outside control from a larger organized church body (McGuire 1997). A study on the recent rise of nondenominational churches conducted by Scott Thumma (2010) at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, estimates that there are roughly 35,000 independent or nondenominational churches in the United States. The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey estimates nondenominational church attendants to be roughly 4.6 percent of the total U.S. population (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). Although the nondenominational church movement is growing rapidly, little scholarship seeks to understand women ministers in general and even less about African American women in nondenominational ministries in particular.

This study focuses on the experiences of African American women in positions of leadership within Christian non-denominational churches and their perceptions of the social and political processes and pathways of becoming a religious leader. I am also interested in their experiences as black women in religious leadership roles and how they negotiate power within the historically male-dominated church structure. Rather than limit the definition of leadership to senior pastor or ordained minister, I will broaden the

scope of leadership to include women operating in various levels of leadership including Sunday school teachers, music ministry leaders, auxiliary ministry leaders, volunteer committee members, associate pastors, preachers, and missionaries. This will be done to capture the processes and pathways to leadership as experienced by African American women in nondenominational churches. Since religion continues to be an important socializing institution within the United States, and even more so within the black community, it is important to examine sociologically how these women negotiate the process of attaining positions of power. The issue of power within the context of gender relations in the Black Church remains a contentious landscape where patriarchal structures are maintained as a community standard for African Americans as a group, and then internalized and recreated at the personal level. By examining black women's religious involvement in nondenominational church structures, this research seeks to place black women at the center of analysis to reveal the many ways leadership is practiced and to redefine power using their situated knowledge and experiences. Black Feminist Thought is a useful theoretical framework for this research because it provides an intersectional approach to viewing the religious oppression of women in ministry. Further, it allows for the examination of how black women in ministry have thrived in a socio-political religious structure that fosters both their rise to positions of leadership and yet hinders their movement to places of structural power. Thus, nondenominational ministries are either a potential site for a paradigm shift toward empowerment to end sexism for African American women in ministry (and potentially black women as a whole) or a site to perpetuate patriarchal oppression.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Access Denied: Roadblocks to the Ministry*

While various social factors have converged to deny women access to the clergy, the dominant ideologies that fuel the practice of gender inequality are bound in cultural traditions and Biblical interpretation (Nesbitt 1997). Protestant denominations that have denied women access to formal ministry opportunities do so based on fundamentalist (conservative) biblical ideology and gender role structures present within the larger culture. Common arguments against ordaining women among most white and African American denominations include women must not have authority over men; women must not teach but learn in silence; scripture prohibits female clergy; and leadership should remain masculine, because God is masculine (Chaves 1997; Gilkes 1985; Kwilecki 1987; and Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Although scriptural resistance to women in the ministry still exists to the present day, gender restrictions reside within a much larger historical and sociopolitical frame that serves as interplay between religion, politics, and patriarchy. In order to understand how and why women have been denied access to structural power within the church, we must situate the activities of eighteenth and nineteenth century black preaching women within the context of the emerging historically black churches and the emergence of the women's rights movement.

### *The Question of True Womanhood*

Besides scriptural resistance to women in the ministry, societal beliefs also played a role in the subordination of women in the ministry. The Victorian Era, which lasted from 1820 to 1860, and the Cult of True Womanhood entered into the imagination of American society to establish the proper attitudes, activities, and behaviors of white

middle-class women (Higginbotham 1993; Perkins 1983; Riggs 2003; Welter 1966). The Cult of True Womanhood was a value system supported by essays, sermons, and publications that purported a true feminine woman possessed four characteristics: piety (religiosity), purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 1966).

The Cult of True Womanhood simultaneously lauded women for being keepers of home and caretakers of the family while ensuring their status as second-class citizens (Welter 1966). The ideology of the true woman maintained a separate sphere for men and women. Men were free to dominate in the public sphere, the place of business and politics. Women were relegated to operate in the private sphere, the place of the home where child rearing and housework were paramount (Welter 1966). Even though these ideals were unattainable for poor and slave women, the emerging black Protestant denominations and middle-class blacks would eventually adopt these ideals as a way to assimilate into larger society and to combat racist and sexist attitudes from whites (Collier-Thomas 2010; Giddings 2009; Higginbotham 1993; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Riggs 2003).

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) refer to the historically black denominations as “The Black Church.” The Black Church, consisting of seven denominations, emerged from the late 1700s to the early 1900s out of the growing need for blacks to establish places of worship independent of racism and white control. These seven denominations are the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME); the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ); the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME); the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America,

Unincorporated; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Dodson 2002; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Woodson 1921).

The Black Church is undoubtedly the most powerful socializing institution in the African American community. From the Reconstruction Period to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, the Black Church has advocated for the freedom, education, and social uplift of its people (Calhoun-Brown 1999; Dodson 2002; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Woodson 1921). Consequently, the role of the black preacher became a position of respectability, honor, and power within the black community (Calhoun-Brown 1999; Dodson 2002; Du Bois 2009; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Woodson 1921). However, dominant ideology such as the Cult of True Womanhood and the patriarchy of white churches were incorporated into the polity of black churches and formed the basis for the exclusion of women from the ministry (Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Jarena Lee, the first female preacher of the AME Church, recounts the story of her call to the ministry in her autobiography. As was the custom of every minister seeking a license to preach, in 1811 Jarena announced her call to the founder of the AME Church, Richard Allen (Andrews 1986; Dodson 2002; Lee 1836). Allen replied, “But as to women preaching, our Discipline knows nothing at all about it-it did not call for women preachers” (Lee 1836:9). Richard Allen, who was currently the pastor of Bethel Church and founder of a fledgling denomination, initially decided against granting Lee a license to preach on the basis that the white Methodist church did not license women (Andrews 1986; Dodson 2002; Lee 1836). Lee (1836:10) records her thought to Allen’s response noting the organizational exclusion of her right to preach:

O how careful we ought to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be impossible, heterodox, or improper for the woman as well as for the man.

In her autobiography, Jarena shares countless occasions where she was met with resistance from her male counterparts during her travels as an itinerant preacher.

Eventually, Lee did win her petition to receive a license to preach after much deliberation from the male hierarchy (Dodson 2002; Lee 1836).

Other women challenged the AME Church for their right to preach during the late 1800s to early 1900s. Rebecca Cox Jackson left the AME Church when the governing body refused to license women as exhorters. Subsequently, Jackson joined the Shakers who embraced a feminist theology (Dodson 2002; Douglas-Chin 2002; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Amanda Berry Smith (1893:120), another AME preacher woman, wrote in her autobiography about her travels preaching “among my own people, and our colored churches”:

The most I did was among my own people. There were then but few of our ministers that were favorable to women’s preaching or taking any part, I mean in a public way: but thank God, there always were a few men that dared to stand by woman’s liberty in this, if God called her.

Julia Foote was an evangelist in the AME Zion Church, the first woman to become an ordained deacon in 1894, and second woman to become an ordained elder in 1900 (Andrews 1986; Collier-Thomas 1996; Foote 1879). Foote, who also wrote an autobiography, reported that a local pastor, Minister Beman, rallied to have her excommunicated from her local congregation in 1844 for preaching in the home of one of the members (Andrews 1986; Collier-Thomas 1996; Foote 1879). Foote (1871:71)

persevered with a strong conviction to the Gospel, believing that only God commissioned and qualified her call. She took a strong feminist stance in chapter 20 of her autobiography entitled “Women in the Gospel”:

We are sometimes told that if a woman pretends to a Divine call, and thereon grounds the right to plead the cause of a crucified Redeemer in public, she will be believed when she shows credentials from; that is, when she works a miracle. If it be necessary to prove one’s right to preach the Gospel, I ask of my brethren to show me their credential, or I can no believe in the propriety of their ministry.

Foote was one of the many black feminist preaching women that negotiated for power and the right to preach within the Black Church. However, church politics, and the ideology of the pulpit being a man’s public sphere converged to deny women access to the highest levels of leadership within the emerging Black Church. This pattern persisted throughout the early 1900s until the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement (Collier-Thomas 2010; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

#### *Race Women, Club Women, and Ladies*

The era between the late 1800s and the early 1900s marked the time of the black women’s club movement in which organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women’s Club (NACWC) and black women’s church organizations rallied together to improve the conditions of their race (Collier-Thomas 2010; Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Terborg-Penn 2004). They focused on a broad scope of issues including the uplift of black men and women, religion, woman suffrage, sexism, education, lynching, and economic opportunities (Brown 1989; Collier-Thomas 2010; Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Terborg-Penn 2004).

During this era, educated black women involved in the women’s club movement and church groups espoused to Victorian ideals which Higginbotham (1993) refers to as

the “Politics of Respectability.” Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995) suggests that the black women’s club movement’s embrace of Victorian ideals was a tactical move to combat stereotypes that depicted black women as immoral, masculine, and lazy. Within the Black Church and the black community true womanhood took on another meaning as women were expected to be race women, or women who were concerned with the uplift of the black race (Carlson 1992; Dodson 2002; Higginbotham 1993). This is most evident in the NACWC’s motto “Lifting as We Climb.” Black women in the late Victorian era had much more freedom than their white counterparts to move between the public and private sphere (Carlson 1992).

“Black Victoria” (Carlson 1992:61) shared the same attributes of piety, and purity as her white counterpart; she was a lady. However, she was also intelligent, educated, confident, and outspoken. As a race woman, Black Victoria was committed to her community and to the education of the entire race (Carlson 1992; Dodson 2002; Higginbotham 1993). This merger between sacred and secular organizations indicates that women’s rights, both in and out of the church, were a primary concern for black women (Collins 1991; hooks 1989). Hence, this period marked a time for black women when they were given freedom to use their education to uplift the race while at the same time restricting their activities in other arenas.

### *Women’s Rights and Religion*

From a socio-historical and socio-political perspective, the push to include women in the ministry and official ordination coincided with the push for women’s right in America during the first wave of feminism from 1840-1925. The Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 held at the Wesleyan Chapel church in Seneca Falls, New York,

called for the overthrow of the pulpit, demanding for women to have equal access to various professions including the clergy (Chaves 1997). Prominent leaders in the movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, believed in the equality of women under God and included this ideology within the twelve resolutions passed at The Women's Rights Convention (Chaves 1997; Ruether 1998).

During this historic period, black women were waging war on multiple fronts. They were fighting for the civil freedoms of African Americans, fighting for the rights of women as a whole, and for the right of black women to preach and receive ordination as well. One such soldier for the Lord was Sojourner Truth, former slave, abolitionist, and itinerant preacher (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Though never formally ordained, she also spoke in 1851, at the National Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, delivering her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech, "which criticized the views of men and of white women for neglecting the plight of black women" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:282).

Truth's claim addresses the intersection between race, sexism, class, status, and gender noting the third class status of women of color within the abolitionist movement and the women's movement. It is possible that while Truth remained a supporter of the women's movement, she distanced herself from the sometimes-racist interests of her white female middle-class counterparts (The Faith Project 2003). Black suffragists such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, founder of the NACWC, and Mary Church Terrell the first president of the NACWC, were also vocal opponents of the racist attitudes of their white counterparts who frequently denied them access to national suffrage organizations (Brown 1989; Collier-Thomas 2010; Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Terborg-Penn 2004).

While it is clear that African American women, during the first wave feminist movement, were fighting against patriarchy, it is important to note that they also suffered under an “interlocking system of oppression” (Collins 1991:222). Collins (1991:225) refers to this system as the “matrix of domination” where race, class, and gender operates simultaneously to oppress and discriminate.

### *Negotiating Power*

In addition to the Women’s Rights Movement, women have used deference as a negotiating tactic to gain access to structural power within the church. Collins (1991:56) observes black female domestic workers and notes that “deference mattered, and those women who were submissive or who most successfully played the role of obedient servant were most highly valued.” Churchwomen used a similar deference behavior when encountering the all-male church structure. Smith (1974) describes this as the “bifurcation of consciousness”, which is the notion that members of oppressed or minority groups must adopt the views of the dominant group and make accommodations to the dominant group in order to gain acceptance (Smith 1974). Because clergy and leadership positions within the church were only officially available to men, women often lacked the power to make demands outright (Purvis 1995). Smith (1974) posits that women who work in male-dominated professions adapt to oppressive environments and sometimes mimic the behavior of their oppressors. Therefore, in many cases deference may have seemed the only option for survival. While this method may seem counterproductive, it is likely to have been a tactical move that is observable within the activities of churchwomen within the historically black denominations of the African Methodist Episcopal church and the Church of God in Christ.

Dodson (2002) observes the negotiating tactics that the AME churchwomen used to exert their influence over the male dominated leadership structure. In one instance, the AME churchwomen raised funds in support of a missionary effort in Haiti in which the (all male) Council of Bishops chose a representative to make the trip (Dodson 2002). After the Council of Bishops chose a representative, they required the churchwomen to release the funds they had raised to the Council. However, Dodson (2002:88) notes that because the churchwomen did not agree with the Council's decision, they delayed releasing the funds and asked the Council to reconsider, saying they were "confident that the Bishops would make a wise and correct selection."

In reference to their response, Dodson (2002) further states that it was a strategically subtle move. Rather than seize the opportunity produced by the shift in the locus of power to advance a feminist agenda, the women acted in a broader concern, one that reflected deference to the patriarchal religious structure. They did not overtly insist that the men were wrong in their decision but instead issued a polite but assertive request for reconsideration. Hence, AME female church leaders used deference to the authority of patriarchy by expressing confidence that such reconsideration would surely produce a wise and correct selection (Dodson 2002).

Kwilecki (1987) interviewed fifty-three African American Pentecostal clergywomen and found that deference to men and the patriarchal church structure is a common theme. Her interview of Pentecostal clergywomen revealed that some of them felt that women could only pastor a church if they were co-pastor with their husbands. In addition, Kwilecki (1987) noted that when dealing with various male authorities within the church, women would openly use deference, submission, flattery, self-abasement, and

helplessness, while avoiding asserting authority (Kwilecki 1987). Some of the clergywomen chose to defer to the patriarchal church structure because of deeply held religious beliefs, while others deferred because they choose not to compete for social status with their black male counterparts. Similarly, Becker (1996) explains that women who attend fundamentalist evangelical denominations must function differently because of the denominations' narrow views of women's abilities (Becker 1996). One woman who left her denomination stated that she was able to operate in a leadership capacity as long as she knew her place and stayed in it (Becker 1996). In short, regardless of whether women in the ministry chose to defer to male leadership because of religious beliefs or as a strategic move to gain access to leadership opportunities, churchwomen have been well aware of resistance to their presence in the ministry.

#### *Church Organizations and Alternative Paradigms of Leadership*

In response to the resistance religious women faced in entering the clergy, they have been successful in creating women's organizations within their denominations independent of organized church structures (Dodson 2002; Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993). In fact, women's organizations have been powerful agencies through which women have successfully negotiated for power and status. The women's club movement grew out of the multiple concerns of racism from the white community and sexism that black women experienced within their own community (Dodson 2002; Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993). As such, there was a growing fear among men that these organizations would provide women with power and financial control over men and the church (Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993).

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note that all the mainline black denominations have a majority female membership with a majority male leadership. However, the infrastructure of the Black Church owes its success to the women who successfully implemented major programs vital to the churches' existence. Black feminists refer to these activities as the black women's culture of resistance (Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Riggs 2003). The women's auxiliary organizations within the Black Church are an example of the culture of resistance against not only gender oppression, but also resistance against religious oppression and intra-level racism (Collins 1991).

Women's organizations within historically black denominations have traditionally worked to enhance the status of women members. Gilkes (1985:685) observes that the Women's Department of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) formed in the early 1900s, still holds "unparalleled power in matters of policy and practice" for women within the denomination. The COGIC Women's Department provides women ministerial training for a broad range of positions such as evangelist, deaconess, and missionary (Gilkes 1985). Hence, the COGIC Women's Department provides a space for leadership despite the fact that the COGIC denomination does not ordain women.

In similar fashion, the AME Church initially excluded women from ordination; however, AME churchwomen formed gender specific organizations such as The Daughters of the Conference and The Women's Parent Missionary Society. Dodson (2002) posits that churchwomen's organizing abilities and strength in numbers were central in shifting power from the male leadership of the church. The church organizations gave them the power to negotiate the interest of women and see a woman,

Dr. Vashti McKenzie, ordained to the highest office of bishop in 2000, without destroying the church (Dodson 2002).

The Woman's Convention (WC), Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, was formed in 1900 as an independent women's organization and led by Nannie Helen Burroughs and Sarah Willie Layten (Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993). Under Burroughs' direction, the WC worked to unite middle-class and working poor black women for the purposes of the racial uplift of black people, but more importantly to maintain a safe space for black women to organize and operate independently of men's control (Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993).

Women have slowly gained access to ordination through the work of organizations like these and others. Ultimately, women have been able to use these organizations as leverage to reassign and share power with their male counterparts. Riggs (2003) concludes:

Thus, in my words, women stand in, yet outside, the gates of The Black Church: they control relatively autonomous women's departments of the church but their authority in other spheres of the church's life and acceptance in leadership roles must be negotiated and approved by male gatekeepers. Consequently, the paradoxical coexistence of a women's tradition of resistance and male gatekeepers stands at the heart of the African American church and tends to lead the leadership and the membership to dismiss or excuse the ways that sexual-gender oppression occurs in the church.

Ultimately, using these organizations as leverage, women have been able to reassign and share power with their male counterparts. Additionally, women have gained access to the clergy by challenging the meaning of leadership itself.

### *Redefining Leadership*

Because Protestant denominations have not ordained women in large numbers, women have historically sought alternate paradigms of leadership. Becker (1996) argues that leadership is embodied rather than acquired. In contrast to patriarchal forms of leadership, women are often more egalitarian in their approach to leadership. Through the black women's club movement and religious organizations, black women have rallied together to educate, uplift, resist, and advance their positions within the church and their community (Collins 1991; Dodson 2002; hooks 1989). This type of organizational activism fostered and accumulated power for and by black women that resisted the top-down power employed by the all-male black church structure. Instead, black clergywomen redefined and transformed power within the church to a shared power structure that created a space for women to be active participants in and out of the church (Collins 1991; Dodson 2002; hooks 1989).

Careful examination of church history reveals that women, indeed, have been active in leading, organizing, preaching, teaching, and establishing the Protestant church. Although the patriarchal structure seized authority, limited the definition of "leader" to the ordained, and denied women access to that coveted position, women still served in numerous roles in the church and well understood their right and call to the ministry (Chaves 1997; Gilkes 1985; Purvis 1995). Churchwomen served as educators, evangelists, itinerant preachers, missionaries, departmental heads, church planters, deaconesses, activists, and pastors (Chaves 1997; Gilkes 1985; Purvis 1995).

As noted earlier, when church structure did not provide a space for women, they launched out, created organizations of their own, and used the power created from these

organizations to promote and advance the status of women. Indeed, research shows that women are currently engaged in redefining what “ministry” means by working as clergy in fields that are separate from the church altogether. Some women have left working in the church and have chosen to work in other fields but maintain that their work is still ministry (Lehman 2002). In short, while men may have created and controlled the highest positions in the church, women have always had an alternative model of leadership independent of male control.

*The Current State of Female Clergy: From the 1960s to the Present*

Although The Black Church has been traditionally involved with issues of social justice and inequality, it has inconsistently advocated for the equality of African American women (Barnes 2006; Calhoun-Brown 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Since their inception, historically black denominations have adopted the white patriarchal ideals of the superiority of men and male leadership, a hold-over from the Victorian era of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Collier-Thomas 2010; Higginbotham 1993; Riggs 2003; Welter 1966). This belief persisted throughout the 1900s to the Civil Rights Movement when the Black Power Movement and Black Theology were grappling to form an Afrocentric perspective and black male legitimacy (Collier-Thomas 2010).

The Civil Rights Movement ushered in a new era for the formation of black and women’s theology (Collier-Thomas 2010). Although men and women worked side-by-side during this period, black women who worked within the movement such as theologian and black feminists Pauli Murray noted the sexist attitudes of men toward women (Collier-Thomas 2010; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Women who worked in the various organizations during this era were relegated to class

citizenship as men sought to establish their manhood (Collier-Thomas 2010; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

The Black Power Movement and Black Liberation theologies were being fueled by the release of the 1965 Moynihan Report which declared the disintegration of the black family and the rise of a black matriarch (Collier-Thomas 2010; Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995). In his analysis of the black family *The Negro family: The case for national action*, Moynihan (1965:30) declared, “[a] fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife.” He went on to say, “Negro husbands have unusually low power.” The report proved to be divisive in an already tense gender landscape within the black community.

In her essay “The Liberation of Black Women,” Pauli Murray ([1970] 1995) notes that near the end of the black power movement, black feminists and activists became aware of a male agenda to establish a patriarchal structure within the African American community. Once again, black women were asked to be race women, but not equals. The matriarch described in the Moynihan Report led black leaders to ask women to support race efforts above gender equality (Collier-Thomas 2010; Dodson 2002; Giddings 2009; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Riggs 2003). This left some women with torn loyalties to the advancement of the race or the equality of women. As such, black women disassociated with the women’s movement and this idea may reveal why black women may be reluctant to espouse to feminist ideals (Dodson 2002; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). As a result, black feminism has critiqued the Black Church citing its sexist and oppressive stance against black women despite the fact that they have been

largely responsible for its success (Barnes 2006; Calhoun-Brown 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Recent studies that examine the state of both black and white attitudes on clergywomen have shown that while many denominations do not have official policies that bar women from leading ministry roles, their numbers in these positions remain relatively low compared to their church participation (Adams 2007). One denominational study examines the roles of women in leadership by measuring their participation in three areas of church involvement: 1) general leadership activities, 2) speaking during mass services, 3) occupying the head clergy position (Adams 2007). Using the 1998 National Congregations Study, Adams (2007) compared Mainline Protestants, Conservative Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and Black Protestants, and found that across the denominations there are different reasons why each group may exclude women from leadership positions.

Most notably, Adams (2007) found that Black Protestants are less likely to have a woman head clergy or have a woman preaching when compared to mainline congregations. Further, conservative evangelical churches are twice as likely to bar women from speaking during weekend services as mainline denominations (Adams 2007). Konieczny and Chaves (2000) also used the 1998 National Congregations Study and found that there are more women leaders in the north in mainline and liberal denominations, and fewer in the south. Congregations led by women typically have fewer resources and tend to have more women congregants. Interestingly, African American churches affiliated with the seven historically black denominations are less likely to have a female head clergy than congregations that are predominantly black,

regardless of their denominational affiliation (Konieczny and Chaves 2000). However, a key finding of this study shows that there are more female-headed churches in predominantly black congregations (12 percent) compared to predominantly white congregations (5 percent) (Konieczny and Chaves 2000).

In the Black Church, women represent 66 to 88 percent of participants but there are only 1 percent of congregations headed by females (Barnes 2006; Konieczny and Chaves 2000; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note the variation of the attitudes toward women in leadership roles by revealing that Baptists and COGIC denominations are less likely to accept women as leaders. Considering that these two denominations make up the majority of the seven historically black churches, it makes sense that previous research has found that overall, historically black denominations are less likely to accept women leaders.

Barnes (2006:381) presented research gathered from the 2000 Faith Factor national data set on historically black Churches, using a single-item question (measuring support for female clergy) “to determine whether involvement in social activism engenders support for women as pastors.” Findings suggest positive relationships between the social activism behaviors of marching and sermons of liberation theologies and support for women in ministry, but not for other social activism behaviors such as sermons on racial issues or political issues (Barnes 2006). Yet another study finds that when gender and feminists agendas are presented in tandem with the agenda of black men, political activism in churches has no effect (Calhoun-Brown 1999).

One explanation offered for the inconsistent support for women in leadership posits that because the Black Church has rallied the black community around the banner

of racism, there was little room left to pay attention to gender concerns, particularly since acceptance into mainstream society had not given equal rights to women of any color (Barnes 2006). Further, since there were few leadership roles for African American men outside the black community, the church served as the primary socializing role for black men. Consequently, it would be a betrayal for black women to purport their own cause above that of the entire race and men in particular.

#### FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Black feminist theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. The intersection of black feminism and womanism centers on understanding the sociohistorical and contemporary experiences of black women as members of a subordinate group, and their fight for survival against race, class, gender, and religious oppression (Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Mitchem 2002). Black feminism examines the historical and contemporary experiences of black women as members of a subordinate group, and their struggle to be heard among white feminist and black male scholars during the second and third wave feminist movements (Collins 1991; hooks 1989). Womanism, a concept first developed by Alice Walker, was born out of black feminism. In her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker (1983) coins the term womanist. She describes a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of color who embraces her womanhood, and provides three definitions for this term.

One aspect of her definition posits that womanists are not “separatists” but are “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker 1983: xi). The most relevant and dramatic dimension of the term womanists comes from the third definition that she provides:

Loves music. Loves dance. *Loves* the moon. Loves the Spirit.  
Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggles. *Loves* the  
Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

This definition clearly describes the attitudes, and activities of African American female religious leaders who are committed to the spiritual and social uplift of their communities and who have a deep sense and love of self. Womanism stresses the importance of black female creativity, spirituality, and self-expression that was denied to black mothers and grandmothers under the heavy weight of oppression (Walker 1983).

Therefore, to highlight the unique experiences of black women, womanism uses spirituality, poetry, ethnography, art, and the lived experiences of black women to understand the multiple challenges that African American women face in their roles as community leaders (Mitchem 2002). Womanist theology reveals the Black Church as both a site for Black women's activism and their religious oppression within denominational churches (Thomas 1998).

However, there is little research that examines the experiences of African American women in nondenominational churches and the multiple forms of oppression they face. Black feminism and womanism provide an opportunity to give voice to their lived experiences using an intersectional approach. Using black feminism and feminist perspectives on power will reveal oppression within the church. Also, these perspectives will reveal the dialectical nature of African American clergywomen's transformation and empowerment through an analysis of their spirituality and community building.

Black women have faced oppression throughout American history. However, not all black women experience or respond to oppression in the same way, due to differences in social location, time, and geographical location (Collins 1991). Social location refers

to an individual's status or standing in society based on their membership in racial, ethnic, religious, class, or gender groups. However, black feminists posit that sex, race, and class oppression creates common experiences among black women, which in some cases led black women to engage in the struggle for equality.

Black feminists and womanists refer to this as the "legacy of struggle" or the "black women's culture of resistance" (Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Mitchem 2002; Higginbotham 1993). This culture of resistance is part of an African American tradition of resistance, activism, and social uplift. Historically, the Black Church is a site where the culture of resistance has played out, even when the church was the source of oppression. By capturing the experiences of African American clergywomen, this study will advance the understanding of how they have negotiated for power and fought against their own oppression within religious settings.

The process of naming one's oppression and defining the self is the process of coming to voice (Collins 1991; hooks 1989; Mitchem 2002; Higginbotham 1993). Coming to voice begins with realizing the importance of speaking (Collins 1991; hooks 1989). As such coming to voice becomes revolutionary and part of the culture of resistance for ordinary African American women and feminist scholars. It also has the potential to create a critical consciousness, which is an awareness of domination that leads to individual and collective forms of resistance (hooks 1989). However, it is important to note that shared group experiences do not guarantee that members of oppressed groups will develop a shared group critical consciousness or collectively resist oppression (Collins 1991; hooks 1989). Individuals have their own perspective or consciousness that they use to interpret their experiences (Collins 1991).

Black feminist scholars introduced the concept of intersectionality to include black women's voices into the feminist discourse. Intersectionality examines how multiple systems of oppression work to dominate African American women. Intersectionality challenges existing white feminist theories and black liberation theories by analyzing the oppression of women of color and suggests that an alternate approach be used to view how systems of oppression operate. Rather than viewing oppression one category at a time such as race, class, or gender and then adding in more categories, oppression should be viewed as an interlocking system.

Collins (1991) asserts that the "matrix of domination" is where race, class, and gender operate simultaneously to oppress and discriminate. Moreover, while these three forms of oppression are the ones that affect African American women the most, the matrix of domination and womanist theology allows for the consideration of other forms of oppression such as age, religion, ethnicity, etc. For example, womanist theology employs an intersectional approach while critiquing the Black Church for being both a site of activism for the black community and a source of oppression for black women where male leadership excludes women from obtaining ordination status (Collins 1991; Mitchem 2002).

Collins (1991) posits that members of oppressed groups experience and resist domination on multiple levels: "the level of personal biography, the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender, and the systemic level of social institutions" (Collins 1991:227). Because no two people have the exact same experiences, the personal level of biography will be different for each person (Collins

1991). This micro level of analysis of black women reveals complex issues such as how and why black women either aid in or resist their own oppression (Collins 1991).

Collins (1991) suggests that this level is where African American women and scholars operate from a place of freedom and a self-defined standpoint. Self-definition is a self-image or self-concept based on concrete experiences. A self-defined standpoint then, becomes how they understand and view the world based on where they stand in terms of race, class, and gender. The level of cultural context provides a basis of experience at the group level where individual experiences are situated or located in group-level contexts of race, class, gender, and religion.

At this level, group knowledge, history, and modes of resistance become salient and validated. Ironically, this level is also the location where dominant group ideology is transmitted into the culture. The level of cultural context is where black women bond and form cultures of resistance through such African American traditions as singing the blues and the black women's club movement. The institutional level (schools, churches, the media, etc.) is the third level in which domination is experienced (Collins 1991). Collins claims that while these institutions may provide skills and educational opportunities for marginalized groups, they are largely engaged with presenting the dominant group's "standpoint" (Collins 1991). Consequently, nondenominational churches can be a space where domination can occur because people seldom leave old ways of thinking when entering new spaces.

The legacy of struggle and the experience of oppression at the level of cultural context and the systemic level of institutions provide a shared group experience for African American clergywomen regardless of their individual biographies. As such,

black women's transformation and awareness of their identity and roles as clergywomen can be a counter narrative to damaging dominant ideologies (Collins 1991). As a logical response to domination and negative stereotypes of black women as matriarchs, ghetto queens, and usurpers of male authority, black women develop an *outsider-within* perspective. The *outsider-within* is a term used to describe the perspective that black women develop due to working in exploitative labor markets. Similarly, the church is a place where black women often serve in full leadership roles but as volunteers without recognition, promotion, and sometimes without pay (Collins 1991; Riggs 2003).

In her book *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in The Black Church*, womanist theologian Marcia Y. Riggs (2003:83) describes a similar position to the *outsider-within* that she terms as "standing in yet outside the gate." Women are solely responsible for independent female auxiliaries within the church, yet lack power and authority within the larger church culture. For example, male leadership often ignores counsel from qualified highly educated women (Riggs 2003). Women in the church possess an understanding of their abilities to function at a much higher level within the church, but also recognize how gender bias and patriarchy keeps them on the outside of recognition, opportunities, and power. As such, black women are able demonstrate agency, resist domination, and define themselves using an *outsider-within* perspective.

A central function of feminist research and theory is to provide critical insight into the dominant systems that oppress women and other marginalized groups.

Accordingly, an important question that I raised in my proposed research is how African American women in nondenominational ministries negotiate power. Looking at the participation of women in the church, the number of women in leadership roles in

relation to their numbers as congregants, and the Biblical sexist ideology used to justify their exclusion, it would seem that indeed male clergy possess an unequal share of power over women, resulting in domination. However, it is necessary to discuss the dialectical nature of women's power within the church and see how and to what degree women wield power.

A classic view of power uses the concept of dominance. Weber (1978) describes power as the ability to exert one's will over others despite their resistance. Domination then is the exercise of power, and the relationship, which binds the follower (subjugated) to the leader (dominant). Feminists describe patriarchy as an unequal distribution of power by which social and economic arrangements privilege men over women in every aspect of life. In this way power becomes a dichotomous structure where men accumulate and exercise power over women who lack power and the means to attain it. Smith (1990) further describes male domination as "relations of ruling" where men exert control over women through bureaucracies, professional organizations, and texts such as formal medical and psychiatric reports.

Alternative views conceptualize power as more complex, theorizing that people wield different kinds of power to achieve different outcomes (Pansardi 2011). Allen (1998) summarizes theories of power in three different ways: power-over, power-to, and power-with. Allen (1998:33) defines power-over as "the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in nontrivial ways." This definition distinguishes itself from domination in that people can have "power-over" someone, such as the power a teacher has over a student, but not act in

ways that dominate. Hence, Allen (1998) concludes that domination is an illegitimate type of power-over that disadvantages one and advantages others (1998).

In contrast to power-over, power-to is the individual potential or ability to act in the face of domination and achieve certain goals (Allen 1998; Pansardi 2011; VeneKlasen and Miller 1998.) Although power-to is a type of individual empowerment for subordinate groups, Allen (1998) suggests that it is not the same as collective resistance. However, power-with is a legitimate type of power that feminist are most interested in because of its abilities to empower and create resistance (Allen 1998; Pansardi 2011). Power-with is based on collective ability, solidarity, and collaboration to achieve common goals. It is through collective efforts that subordinate groups are most empowered and able to resist domination. (Allen 1998; Pansardi 2011; VeneKlasen and Miller 1998.)

In order to fully understand how African American women in nondenominational churches negotiate power with their male counterparts, a dynamic approach must be used to examine their past and present activities. The matrix of domination, which is an examination of power-over, allows for an intersectional approach to include the ways in which race, class, gender, and religion work to oppress. Also, it helps to include ways that women can be both oppressor and oppressed. Power-to and power-with explains how African American women have acquired both individual and collective power against religious sexism.

More importantly, power-with speaks to the culture of resistance that African American women have used to form organizations and movements both in and out of the church to resist domination of all kinds. Black women exercise agency by choosing their

places of worship and transform institutions. When transformation is not possible, they use the spiritual lens of a womanist perspective to empower themselves. However, in order for critical consciousness to develop among African American women in nondenominational churches must use collective activism to resist domination (Collins 1991). In conclusion, while men may have used power-over as a form of domination to oppress women within the church, women have used power-to and power-with to negotiate, react to, and resist the matrix of domination.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Examining the literature and previous studies raised several key questions that were not addressed. First, although researchers have extensively examined the experiences of African American religious women and activists, to date, none have included the experiences of black female clergy in nondenominational churches. Second, only a few studies explore in-depth the self-perceptions of black female clergy and how they arrive at a self-definition. Also, few if any studies have merged black feminists and womanist perspectives to understand how black women in nondenominational churches negotiate power, which are new religious spaces that may or may not share the same beliefs and sexist practices of historically black churches. Therefore, this research proposes to examine the experiences of African American women in nondenominational ministries. A number of questions will be addressed in this research including but not limited to the following:

1. Why do African American women choose nondenominational ministries?
2. What is the process of becoming a female minister in nondenominational settings?

3. How do race, class, and gender intersect in the lives of these women?
4. How do they perceive and use power?
5. How do African American female ministers perceive themselves and how do these perceptions affect their roles as ministers?

## CHAPTER II METHODOLOGY

My initial research interest stems from my own experiences as an African American clergywoman. However, the pathway to leadership and ordination varies for each woman, and diverges again depending on the organizational structure within each denomination. Thus, my research aims to understand the various issues of African American women in Christian nondenominational churches and ministry leadership positions. This study focuses on their experiences in ministry, the various pathways and processes to leadership, and how they negotiate power the male-dominated patriarchal church structure.

My initial goal was to recruit twenty African American clergywomen for interviews. I began recruiting by reaching out to women that I knew through my years of attendance and preaching at various churches. I also utilized Facebook and a black clergywoman directory to contact women who had profiles that identified them as women ministers. After I conducted the first round of interviews, respondents referred me to other women in ministry who participated in the study. In all, I obtained a theoretical sample (Charmaz 2006) that included twenty African American women who operated at various levels of leadership within nondenominational churches. My sampling technique involved seeking a variety of respondents in order to make my sample more representative. As such, the sample includes a diverse group of respondents: some are ordained and some are not; there are clergywomen who are senior leaders and some who are worship leaders, etc.

I conducted interviews during the summer of 2013. The interviews took place over the telephone, in person, or online. Face-to-face interviews took place either in

coffee shops, churches, or in their homes. The typical interview lasted about an hour. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. In semi-structured interviews, I asked about their previous and current denominational affiliation, how and why they became ministers, and their experiences as African American women in ministry. Using *Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis* software, I coded the data according to key themes that emerged: 1) denominational vs. nondenominational churches, 2) how they perceive their roles as ministers and their self-identity, and 3) challenges that they have faced.

I summarized the respondent demographics<sup>3</sup> in and I used pseudonyms in this study to maintain confidentiality. The clergywomen ranged in age from 36 to 71 at the time of this study and all of the women currently lived in Texas except for Vanessa who lives in Oregon, and Deniece who lives in Georgia. Eight of the clergywomen were married, eight were divorced, three were single-never-married, and one woman was widowed. Only three of the women did not have children. Eighteen of the women self-identified as lifetime churchgoers with a recollection of church attendance dating back to early childhood, which many referred to their long-time church attendance as being “from the womb, to the tomb.” The other two clergywomen self-reported a long-time church attendance of more than 20 years.

The participants in this study all currently self-identify as nondenominational, and have a variety of previous denominational affiliations. Nondenominational churches are churches that don’t identify with any particular denomination (McGuire 1997; The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). Eight of the clergywomen self-identified

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 1 and 2 on pages 35 and 36

Baptist (alone) as their previous church denomination. Six of the women self-identified Baptist, in combination with other denominations, (AME, Pentecostal, Methodist, and Catholic) as their previous denomination. Three of the women self-identified nondenominational or multidenominational as their previous denominational affiliation. Two reported the Church of God in Christ as their previous denomination. Only one reported Church of Christ as their previous church denomination.

Nine of the clergywomen self-reported as having some college education (associates degree, or Bible college), whereas eleven of the women are self-reported college graduates (bachelor's, master's, PhD, and ThD). At least nine of the clergywomen self-reported having some level of formal training (Bible College, Seminary/Theological) in preparation for the ministry. Thirteen of the clergywomen self-reported as being formally ordained. Ordained clergywomen self-identified as pastors, co-pastors, apostles, bishops, chaplains, or ministers. Seven of the clergywomen self-reported as lay leaders or as not formally ordained ministers. Women who were not formally ordained self-identified as preachers, evangelists, youth ministers, worship/praise leaders, teachers, administrators, and radio personality/conference host.

My status as an African American clergywoman undoubtedly gave me an insider status and shaped my interactions with the participants (Adler and Adler 1987). As such, some of the clergywomen assumed that I empathized with their experiences. While I may share similar experiences with my fellow sisters of the cloth, I did not assume that all of our experiences were identical and that we shared the same perspective. Therefore, open-ended questions allowed for respondents to discuss in detail their individual experiences shaped by social location, and previous denominational affiliations. Also,

my shared multiple status as a black, clergy, woman however, provided a level of comfort for participants to freely express certain aspects of the black female religious experience that might not have been revealed had I been, white male, or non-religious.

**Table 1 Participant Demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Ordained</b>	<b>Ministry Work</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Previous Denomination</b>	<b>Church Attendance</b>
<b>Yvonne</b>	40	Divorced	Master's	TX	Y	Teacher/ Preacher	N	Bi- vocational	Church of Christ	lifetime
<b>Jackie</b>	44	Married	Some college	TX	Y	Co-Pastor	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist	lifetime
<b>Vanessa</b>	66	Married	Bible college	OR	Y	Pastor	Y	Pastor	Baptist	29 yrs
<b>Barbara</b>	42	Single	Master's	TX	N	Radio & conference host	N	Bi- vocational	Baptist	lifetime
<b>LaShawn</b>	41	Married	Associate's	TX	Y	Co-Pastor	Y	Bi- vocational	Multi- denominational	lifetime
<b>Renee</b>	42	Married	Bachelor's/ seminary	TX	Y	Pastor	Y	Pastor	Non- denominational	lifetime
<b>Sherease</b>	56	Divorced	Associate's	TX	N	Preacher, Youth minister	Y	Bi- vocational	Non- denominational	lifetime
<b>Kathy</b>	49	Divorced	PhD,	TX	Y	Pastor	Y	Bi- vocational	AME & Baptist	lifetime
<b>Claire</b>	53	Married	Some college	TX	Y	Co-Pastor	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist & Pentecostal	lifetime
<b>Deniece</b>	35	Divorced	Master's	GA	N	Worship Leader/Recording artist	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist	lifetime

**Table 2 Participant Demographics Continued**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Ordained</b>	<b>Ministry Work</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Previous Denomination</b>	<b>Church Attendance</b>
<b>Althea</b>	42	Married	Some college	TX	Y	Evangelist/ online prayer site	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist	24 yrs.
<b>Josephine</b>	71	Widowed	Vocational School	TX	Y	Bishop	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist	lifetime
<b>Audrey</b>	55	Single	Bachelor's, theology & business	TX	Y	Apostle	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist & Pentecostal	lifetime
<b>Dawn</b>	58	Single	Bachelor's/ seminary	TX	N	Preacher	N	Bi- vocational	Methodist & Baptist	lifetime
<b>Pauline</b>	69	Divorced	Doctorate of Theology	TX	Y	Pastor	Y	Bi- vocational	COGIC	lifetime
<b>Destiny</b>	40	Divorced	Master's	TX	N	Evangelist/ Administration	Y	Bi- vocational	Baptist	lifetime
<b>Erica</b>	48	Divorced	PhD, pastoral counseling	TX	Y	Chaplain/Faith- Based Counselor	Y	Bi- vocational	AME & Baptist	lifetime
<b>Sarah</b>	43	Married	Associate's/ some Bible college	TX	N	Praise singer, Pastor's wife	Y	Bi- vocational	COGIC	lifetime
<b>Tabitha</b>	60	Divorced	Doctorate of Theology	TX	Y	Pastor	Y	Pastor	Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal	lifetime
<b>Cloe</b>	54	Married	Some college/ some Bible college	TX	N	Musician/Bible Study teacher	Y	Homemaker	Baptist	lifetime

### **CHAPTER III FINDINGS**

The primary finding from this research reveals that the clergywomen in this study share similar experiences as African American women. However, their individual social locations provide varied biographical contexts for each person, which subsequently creates multiple worldviews and pathways concerning female religious leadership. Social location refers to an individual's status or standing in society based on their membership in racial, ethnic, religious, class, or gender groups. These social factors, including education, age, culture, and marital status have provided the context for their experiences and unique personal biographies. More importantly, female religious leaders have historically conducted their work under a religious patriarchal structure and thus have experienced opposition to their presence within Christian denominations. However, their practical understanding of the structure itself shapes how African American clergywomen operationalize their role as religious leaders.

#### **TYPES OF SPEAKERS**

Interviews with African American clergywomen in nondenominational church settings reveal both individual and group perspectives, or levels of awareness, about the patriarchal structure under which they operate. The more opposition the respondents faced in their roles as religious leaders, the more aware they became of the sexist attitudes of their male counterparts and the religious patriarchy that exist in the church. In contrast, respondents who did not report opposition to their roles did not voice an awareness of patriarchy within the church. This allowed me to create a typology that rearticulates their perceptions of themselves as religious leaders and their understanding

of relations of ruling within religious institutions. I based the typology on the interviews with African American clergywomen and how they talked about their experiences.

While the themes that emerged in the data demonstrate that the respondents in this study share similar experiences as African American women in ministry, their different social locations provide contextual differences that creates divergent perspectives and how they talk about their experiences.

In each of the clergywomen's experiences, they reported experiencing some type of challenge in their roles as religious leaders. However, the types of struggles were different for each woman, which resulted in three different perspectives, and different ways that each group discussed the themes that emerged in the data. Some of the respondents believed that their struggles were either spiritual in nature (deriving from otherworldly sources) or that they were due to the resistance of people in the church. Other respondents shared these same views, but they also reported that they faced opposition from men in their roles as religious leaders. Subsequently, the categories that each woman fell into progressed along a continuum of whether or not they expressed their struggles as spiritual or gendered. I define gendered challenges as the various kinds of opposition and roadblocks that are unique to women in their work as religious leaders such as limited access to leadership opportunities based on gender, performing unequal shares of gendered work in the church (cooking, cleaning, childcare), or receiving unwanted sexual advances and discriminating comments, etc. As such, I have categorized how the women articulated their experiences in one of three ways:

*Unaffected, Aware, or Critical.*

In the *Unaffected* category, the clergywomen expressed a more traditional view of gender roles and leadership. They either believed that things are as they should be or that they are not affected by gender struggles even if they expressed having experienced opposition as a religious leader. Women in this category did not acknowledge gender struggles as a primary concern either because they simply did not report experiencing gendered challenges or because they did not frame their challenges in gendered terms. Therefore, this group can be seen as *Unaffected* or immune to relations of ruling in the church, even though their activities as religious leaders are not widely accepted across all Christian denominations.

The *Aware* clergywomen understand that gender inequality unfortunately exists, but they believe that God has and will continue to direct their lives. They feel that God is the one that has and will continue to advocate for their work as women in ministry. Their awareness of gender inequality comes from self-reported experiences but they do not express a need to advocate for themselves or for other women in ministry outright. However, they still did work on behalf of other women, for spiritual empowerment and social uplift, but not for acquiring structural positions within the clergy. As those who are aware of gender discrimination within religious institutions, they expressed that the opposition that they have faced is more about individual men and unsupportive churches than an overarching structural problem.

The *Critical* clergywomen also acknowledge gender inequality within the church. However, unlike *Aware* clergywomen, this acknowledgement leads them to critical consciousness. This group of clergywomen is “critical” because they are conscious of relations of ruling in general and critical of church structure in particular. I define critical

based on bell hooks' (1989) book *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, and not based on a definition of critical which simply means negative. As such **Critical** refers to the careful reflection, analysis, and examination of self in relation to the structures that oppress and dominate (hooks 1989).

**Table 2 Typology of Speakers According to Gendered Challenges**

	Pseudonyms	Ordination Status	Title/Position
Unaffected	Vanessa	Ordained	Pastor
	Deniece	Not Ordained	Worship Leader/Recording Artist
	Dawn	Not Ordained	Preacher
	Sarah	Not Ordained	Praise singer, Pastor's wife
Aware	Jackie	Ordained	Co-Pastor
	Barbara	Not Ordained	Radio & conference host, youth
	LaShawn	Ordained	Co-Pastor
	Sherease	Not Ordained	Preacher, youth
Critical	Yvonne	Ordained	Teacher/Preacher
	Renee	Ordained	Pastor
	Kathy	Ordained	Pastor
	Claire	Ordained	Co-Pastor
	Althea	Ordained	Evangelist/online prayer site
	Josephine	Ordained	Bishop
	Audrey	Ordained	Apostle
	Pauline	Ordained	Pastor
	Destiny	Not Ordained	Evangelist/Administration
	Erica	Ordained	Chaplain/Faith-Based Counselor
	Tabitha	Ordained	Pastor
	Chloe	Not Ordained	Musician/Bible Study teacher

The **Critical** group reported facing gendered challenges, but situated their experiences within a framework of oppression. They fully acknowledged that the opposition they experience is not just due to spiritual causes or from uncooperative/disgruntled church folk, but the challenges are part of a male-dominated structure that women must work against at various levels to resist both personally and collectively. They also believe that God is their ultimate source of power, but they use

this standpoint as the basis for their belief that all women have a legitimate right to operate at the highest levels of organizational structure within the church.

#### WHY NONDENOMINATIONAL?

Although all of the clergywomen in the study currently identify as nondenominational, they report a variety of past denominational affiliations. In order to fully understand the experiences of women in nondenominational church settings, it is important to begin with an investigation of why they choose these types of churches. Also, it is worth noting their perceptions of the differences of where they previously attended church compared to the type of church they are currently involved in. This information situates black clergywomen within a specific context that is different from women who are currently attending and serving in historically black and Protestant denominations and is a vital factor in their social location.

According to the 2010 Survey of Independent and Nondenominational Churches, independent churches have been on the rise for the last 31 years (Thumma 2010). At least 35 percent of nondenominational churches are part of a Network, Fellowship, and Association of churches or denominations despite the “non” prefix in their title (Thumma 2010). Although most of these churches are independently founded, 12 percent of nondenominational churches were previously part of a denomination. In 2010, the churches surveyed reported a median attendance of regular worship services of 105. Of these participants, 11 percent were African American and 74 percent white. Nondenominational churches describe their services as joyful, filled with God’s presence, inspirational, and thought-provoking (Thumma 2010). There is a heavy emphasis on classes that teach the Bible, such as Sunday or church school and scriptural studies, as

well as an emphasis on contemporary music. While all of these characteristics may be found within other denominational worship services, the decrease of mainline churches and the rise of nondenominational churches require investigation into the perceived differences that congregants report for their exodus.

#### *Exodus: Movement from Denominational to Nondenominational Churches*

Most of the women in the study indicated that they left their previous denominations because they were looking for something different in one of three ways. First, they expressed wanting more knowledge and/or more opportunities. Second, they expressed that they wanted freedom from religious dogma, tradition, and doctrine. Third, they articulated a desire to see Christian churches to be free from separation, a desire that stems from their belief of what heaven really looks like. This exodus from denominational churches demonstrates agency in their decisions to seek a more liberating worship experience. All three groups of respondents, the *Unaffected*, the *Aware*, and the *Critical*, voiced one of the three reasons for their exodus from their previous denomination. However, three respondents in the *Critical* group left because they realized that their denominational structure would not allow them to operate as ministers.

#### *Exodus of the Unaffected*

Women in the *Unaffected* category all express a desire for something more than their previous denominations offered. However, the number of years they have spent as a churchgoer helped to shape their experiences and determine the reasons for their exodus. Clergywoman Vanessa, a 66-year-old ordained Pastor, is one of only two women who did not grow up in church. Vanessa remembers that after her conversion experience that she and her husband briefly attended a Baptist church. However, it was not long until she

began to open up her home to the community for Bible study. Around this same time, she met her current pastor under whom she obtained ordination through a nondenominational church. This has been the bulk of her 29 years as a churchgoer. Therefore, she has had very little experience with denominational churches, black or otherwise. She and her husband have their own nondenominational “mobile ministry” in Oregon and she continues to receive support from her pastor, a white minister with loose associations to the Free Methodists church.

The other three women in the *Unaffected* category have different perspectives from Vanessa because of their lifetime church attendance and contact with previous denominations. Dawn, a 66-year-old single preacher, remembers a distinct moment when she began looking for something and questioning her current denomination.

I was at the Baptist Church, I was there one Sunday, and it just hit me, what am I here for? If we are here to get saved, what else is there? Because every Sunday, I would go and I would hear the message that He died, and I was like, "Well, Father, there has to be something else." So I just began to investigate and do some research and started visiting other churches.

As Dawn recalls the moment when she realized that she wanted something more she tears up and begins to cry. She says that initially, her friends tried to convince her to continue attending Baptist churches. However, her friends have followed her decision and now all attend nondenominational churches.

Like Dawn, Deniece was also searching for something different. Deniece is a 35-year-old worship leader and Gospel recording artist, who was searching for freedom from tradition and religion as well as for a freer worship experience that included contemporary Gospel music during services:

I know things have changed in different Baptist churches. For example, I am not putting anyone down, but I know for me, my experience was tradition. I know now, it was a lot of religion, or religious activity, that wasn't God-focused. It seems to be very man-focused and be about what people felt they deserve and what they can get. My Baptist church, it was a bunch of rules that didn't really seem to line up with word.

Deniece went on to describe what she calls her conversion story in which she was first exposed to lively contemporary Gospel music that she compared to the “dirty south crunk” music of secular artists such as Master P. She said that she was drawn to the music and the fact that church members and even the pastor were dressed more casually in “jeans, nice buttoned-down shirts, and tennis shoes.” She saw young people dancing and lifting their hands, which made her want to do the same, although she said, she was too religious to do so at the time of this new encounter. Also, Deniece was impressed by this youthful pastor's message.

I was sitting there like, “You talking to me?” then he talked about smoking weed and how that was something that he was into when he was younger but then God pulled him away. It was like a testimony day. And I just go, “Wow. Somebody gets me.” They see where I am at and even though he didn't know me. I felt like that word was for me and I was, “Wow, I would hear this in a church?” I was there!

#### *Exodus of the Aware*

All of the clergywomen in the *Aware* category come from a Baptist background with the exception of LaShawn who has had experience with multiple denominations. LaShawn, who is also a 41-year-old co-pastor, shares a similar sentiment, “I have chosen a nondenominational church because I believe that our relationship with Christ is about salvation and not about a particular organization or denomination.” Jackie, a 44-year-old ordained co-pastor and former Baptist, gives her take on why she is now

nondenominational, “I'm nondenominational for the simple fact that I grew up in a Baptist background and this is my take, in heaven there are no sections, there are no Baptist, there are no Methodist, there are no Presbyterians. We are God's people. To say only Baptists can come here, is foolish to me.”

Additionally, Barbara who is a 42-year-old single minister with ties to her father's Baptists church, shares her reasons for not identifying with a particular denomination. Barbara has a Master in Communication with an emphasis on film, production, and media. Her ministry work as a Christian radio and conference host is closely related to her degree. She believes that denominations should not be a part of one's religious identity. “For me, using denominations for more than a reference is burdensome. It resists unity. It starts to become like Sadducees and Pharisees. Oh my gosh! Just because you don't do XYZ ... It makes it hard to then unify and to partner with other members that are in the universal Body of Christ.” Barbara's philosophical approach to church is “eat the chicken, leave the bones.” This means that each denomination has something good to offer, so you take what is good from each one and leave what you don't want.

Within the *Aware* group, Sherease is the only one who grew up in a nondenominational church and then attended a Baptist church in early adulthood. However, when I asked Sherease why she currently identifies as nondenominational she shared similar reasons.

I didn't really choose to be a part of one now. It wasn't the non-denomination; it was the relationship hunger. It was the revelation that was coming forth. It was the ability to dig into the scriptures and not be limited by, OK, this is what we're going to teach over the next 12 months. The religiosity and the mindset was so entrenched, that always ... you've seen these invisible bridges

between you and your connection to God. My hunger was... there's something more to this. God has already ... He's convinced me that He is, but now I need to get to the greater.

The hunger for a non-denominational relationship was created early. It was never just, OK, I want to go where they don't call it something." It was always the hunger for, OK, who's talking about God and the kingdom?" Christ never preached church, he preached kingdom. Denominations have always preached church, and the Christ who established the church. That was my hunger. That's what drew me there.

### *Exodus of the Critical*

The clergywomen in the *Critical* category share similar stories of why they chose nondenominational churches. They also were seeking freedom from tradition, and wanted to learn more. At least two of the women reported that their entire church relinquished their current denominational status to nondenominational. Like clergywomen in the *Unaffected* and *Aware* category, clergywomen in the *Critical* group all desired more from their current denominations. However, Yvonne, Kathy, and Erica also expressed that they left their current denominations in search of opportunities to serve in leadership capacities not available at their current churches.

Yvonne, a 41-year-old ordained clergywoman, recalls the time she expressed a desire to teach the adult mixed-gendered congregation. She grew up in the Church of Christ, her family's denominational choice, but began attending other denominational churches when she went to college. Yvonne's exciting new religious experiences and the new knowledge that she was gaining compelled her to share this information with her home church when she returned home from college during the summer. However, as she explains it, the current church structure was all male and only men were allowed to teach

in the presence of both genders. Yvonne describes in detail the process by which she then chose a nondenominational church setting:

I can say that my choice for going that way was basically through college. That is when I started having all of those different experiences. And for as much as I wanted to return to my home church and use the growth, I'm going to call it the growth that I experienced in my Christian walk, my home church did not receive what I was talking about. So when I came back to my church and I started talking about how fantastic I thought the Holy Spirit was and all of these interesting things that God was doing in me developmentally, my understanding of the Scripture, and even my role in the body of Christ.

I wasn't really trying to make a stand to say that I'm a woman and I should do such and such. But it was just that I was having these experiences that I was going to the leadership of my church, which happened to be male, and explaining that I love God so much and I love the Scriptures so much. I would love to learn to teach. Without saying so in plain terms, they told me that I would never have an opportunity to teach anybody in that church, except to teach in maybe a Sunday school capacity. I found that disheartening. I just realized that I was having an experience that wasn't appreciated at my church.

In short, Yvonne's exodus from her denomination intersected with a desire for more knowledge and an equal desire to take on a leadership role in a church that did not welcome women in ministry.

Kathy, a 49-year-old is a pastor and founder of a radically inclusive nondenominational church that is affiliated with a trans-denominational association of churches called The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, which works to create safe spaces for women, the LGBTQI community, and other marginalized groups. Kathy left denominational churches because she, like other clergywomen in this study, wanted something more. Kathy is also like Yvonne in that she realized that she was called to preach and that Baptist churches would not readily accept her call to the clergy.

Although she was also raised in the AME Church, a historically black denomination that ordains women, she made her decision to leave both denominations for a more liberating approach to ministry. When I asked Kathy why she settled within a nondenominational structure, she replied:

...because I don't like labels. I don't like labels and also because some denominational churches aren't as open to female leadership. Now the AME Church is, and my grandfather was a very big advocate for women having full equality in the church. He really fought for women to become bishops and all of that. I like the AME Church. They embrace women, but mostly because my grandfather embraced women, and really believed in the equality of women in ministry, up to the highest levels. I like the AME Church, but the non-denominational church was more comfortable for me. I feel like ... more like ... like I said, because I don't like labels. It seemed like there was more diversity within some of the non-denominational churches. Most of them readily embraced women in leadership.

Erica, a 48-year-old hospital chaplain, ordained pastor and founder of her own non-profit religious organization, also had experience with both the AME and Baptist denominations. Erica describes herself as a sixth generation AME but says that this is her parent's church. After her mother's passing she had an "epiphany moment" at the age of 24 in which she realized that "she didn't know God for herself." She left the AME Church where she grew up in search of God and subsequently attended a Baptist church. However, when she realized that she was called to the ministry, she knew that she would not have access to leadership opportunities within the Baptist church:

There were some things kind of going on too, that I was frustrated with, and I knew that there was a call on my life at that point, but I knew I couldn't stay there because they didn't permit women to be preachers. I decided that I was going to go back to the AME Church, where I knew that women were readily and openly received in the denomination. Not that they didn't have some of the same struggles, but the denomination's policies were open to women becoming pastors, itinerant pastors in the AME Church.

Since then, Erica left the AME Church in search of something different like other clergywomen in this study and attended nondenominational churches.

In summary, clergywomen in this study follow the pattern of many others who have left their previous denomination to become part of the growing number of religiously unaffiliated and nondenominational churchgoers (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008). Respondents perceived that nondenominational churches tend to have livelier or more “Spirit-filled” worship services, and more Bible teaching unrelated to denominational dogma (Thumma 2010). Even though all of the women identify as nondenominational, a few are part of a Network, Fellowship, or Association of churches.

Participants who left denominational churches follow a pattern of black churchwomen who pioneered the rise of the Protestant church in America. When their churches did not provide a space for their activities, they launched out and created new opportunities and organizations for women. In like manner, African American women are exercising agency by leaving their previous churches to find a worship experience that offers more freedom, more opportunities to learn, and more opportunities for ministerial development.

What seems to be important to all respondents is that these nondenominational church settings provide more teaching, more freedom, more inclusion and diversity, less tradition, and for some in the *Critical* group more opportunities for leadership. The idea that they left their previous denominations for something more indicates that their former churches may have provided a foundation for their faith. However, other social factors, that became salient through their individual biographies, such as education (college attendance), age, geographical location, and ethnicity shaped their experiences and in turn

altered their perspectives. This new perspective allows them to see church differently and gives them the freedom to question how church should function. More importantly, it provides a different perspective of their role as religious leaders and provides a space for spiritual freedom, and self-recovery.

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
Everywhere Where I go, I'm gonna let it shine  
In my neighborhood, I'm gonna let it shine  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine  
(Loes 1920)*

## IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION OF ROLES

The majority of women in this study see themselves as religious leaders within their churches and communities, with the exception of Sara, who sees leadership as a male-only position that she cannot occupy. Instead, she sees herself in a support role working alongside her husband who is the pastor of their newly established church. With one exception, members of all three categories--*The Unaffected, The Aware, and The Critical*--have a self-definition marked by their social status or role as a minister. Moreover, their role as ministers forms a master identity for many of the women. A master status is the most important social position that an individual occupies. It becomes central to one's social identity and determines how one will behave in virtually all other statuses occupied by the individual (Hughes 1945). This master identity becomes the lens through which one perceives and interacts with their world. Previous use of the master status concept posits that it is ascribed to an individual from external sources such as in labeling theory, and the notion of stigma (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963). However, more recent use of the concept of master status notes how individuals work to achieve and maintain a master status. Two examples are found in Adler and

Adler's (1991) study of college athletes, and Armato and Marsiglio's (2002) study on the members of the evangelical Christian movement Promise Keepers. Their research indicates a shift in viewing the concept of a master status from one that is discrediting and negative to one that is self-describing and positive. Similarly, clergywomen in this study who claim a master identity as a minister do so, not based on negative external forces that label them as deviants, but do so based on the pursuit of an actualized self that is more in line with the personhood of Christ.

There are two dimensions to the process of how they arrive at a self-concept and social identity: how they see themselves and their perceptions of their experiences in their roles as ministers. How they see themselves or their self-concept (self-definition) reveals a positive self-esteem. Cultural and religious ideas that characterize the expectations of an ideal minister include self-sacrifice and servitude. These concepts are prevalent in their descriptions about themselves and are consistent with the personhood of Christ as a selfless messenger of social justice.

Furthermore, when they describe their experiences we begin to see how they believe others perceive them. Interestingly, despite the occasionally negative experiences and negative perceptions that they believe others have of them, they maintain a positive level of self-esteem resulting in self-empowerment. Thus, African American female religious leaders develop a unique perspective known as the *outsider-within* (Collins 1991) in which their self-definition contradicts the dominant group's ideologies such as negative multiple negative stereotypes of black women and the constraining ideology that constructs women as the backbone of the church (supporters) rather than leaders.

*The Unaffected: Self-definition and Social Identity*

*Unaffected* clergywomen articulated a self-definition that both fits with how they perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them. Deniece is a worship leader and recording artist. She is also a mother, a college graduate with two master's degrees, and an English teacher. She has multiple roles and multiples identities, however, her role in ministry is a master identity in which sees herself as a messenger:

For me I would say I am a worship leader first before the recording artist. I believe that a worship leader seeks the heart of God, seeks to express the heart of God with music, and seeks to convey His message to the people. Whether it is the actual Gospel or making things relevant by speaking to them kind of like the preacher did. I speak to them out of my experiences.

Deniece believes that God uses her gift of song to convey positive messages to men, women, and children everywhere she goes. As a teacher, she says, "We got to be a *light* on our jobs. I can't pray for my students openly, but through my actions I can show them the character of Christ. I am leading the people of God, pointing the way to Christ to those who don't know him." Her role as a minister is rooted in the black community with a commitment to African American women in particular:

As African-American women, we have a lot of negative images that we see in the media. When I teach them, I am like, "Wow. Oh man you guys are so gifted, you guys have different talents and so much potential. I don't want you to look at images on TV and radio and think that's the standard for Black women." As a woman I feel that my role is to, again, lead people to Christ in that capacity. But also, most specifically, when He is giving me different songs. I see how He is using me, my personal experiences, and the things I have learned and continue to learn and it tends to be directed at women. Whatever it is self-esteem, love, relationships, or our own relationship with Christ. Even if we are single, we are to always have Christ as our first love. We also have to learn to love ourselves and then we can show his love to others. I feel that my role is to a beacon of light to speak to other women and men as well.

Deniece has developed an *outsider within* perspective, or alternative point of view that rejects the stereotypes presented by dominant ideologies which depict black women as video vixens, matriarchs, and mummies. Hence, she uses her role as a worship leader to transform the way black women see themselves.

Initially, Dawn comes across as very quiet and reserved. At the beginning of the interview, she thought that she would not have much to contribute. However, as our conversation progressed, Dawn was able to express a fully developed self-definition and perception on her role as a minister:

What does ministry mean to me and my identity? Hmm. It's being a blessing to the people. It's just...being a blessing to the people. A young lady sent me a card because I blessed them financially the other week. In the card she says, "Dawn, you are such a powerful woman of God. You have a quiet spirit about you." I'll never forget that and she said, "You see a lot, but you say very little. I believe God is using you as a weapon in the body of Christ, a powerful weapon!" I've heard that before from other people, but it's because I love people. I love people and doing what God has called me to do to the best of my ability. I hate to see people hurting because I know what that's like. I know sometimes I can't do anything, but the best thing to do is pray for them, and just encourage them.

Although Dawn is a woman of quiet dignity, she exhibits a passion for her role as a minister. Dawn's self-definition of "being a blessing to the people" is possible because she feels that others see her that way. Subsequently, her experiences in her role as a minister help to shape her identity.

Vanessa, the ordained co-pastor, embraces an identity fully immersed in the personhood of Christ. For Vanessa this means that she no longer has a personal identity based on any other role that she might occupy. She credits this self-definition to themes of redemption and forgiveness found in the personhood of Christ:

Oh, man! It means I am a brand new creation. Old things have passed away. When they passed away I understood how I used to be stuck on me, it was all about me. I was on the broad road of going to hell, and didn't know it. God stopped me, in His solemn grace, saved me, took my crap and crucified it at the cross. Before I got saved, we'll make that the benchmark. Before I received the Lord in '84, everything was about karate and me. Just me and karate. Karate was my ticket to open up any door. Because I had a black belt, students, and made money with it-- karate was my God. It was my idol. It became about Jesus, really. I have to keep putting Jesus there. It became about Jesus, seeing what He did for me.

Like the other clergywomen in the *Unaffected* category, Vanessa's role as a minister is her master status/identity.

Sarah is the only woman in the study who did not identify herself as a minister. Sarah is a 43-year-old mother of four, currently enrolled in Bible College at the time of this study. Like Deniece, she is a worship leader with a passion for delivering "the Word of God" through song. I confess that I had imposed my own definition of female leadership on Sarah. At the time that I asked her to participate in the study, I thought that because she attended Bible College that I would be talking to someone who aspired to ordination or other structural positions of church leadership. Once she began to speak, I realized that she didn't share my point of view. Therefore, I resolved to respectfully listen to Sarah's experiences and provide her own self-definition.

Unlike Deniece, Sarah does not regard her position as lead worshiper as leadership. Sarah's self-definition and perception of her role is based on the traditional models of church leadership:

Right now, I'm just the Pastor's wife. I'm not doing much, if anything, right now. But that is only because we are just starting. We're just getting started. But my ultimate role, as far as once we get more people involved in our ministry, is I'm going have to be over the music department. Because that's my forte. I am not a

leader in the traditional sense of the word. I don't see myself in a leadership role as far as ministers go. But my ministry is the music itself. I minister through...we minister through song. And we minister through prayer. But I don't intend to pastor or anything like that, no.

In general, I am not into leadership so much. And only because there's a scripture out there that says women are not to usurp authority over a man. So if there's a man in charge, then I have to do only to that authority. I'm not allowed as far as scripture is concerned and as far as a protocol, that God set up in the Church. Women are not allowed to take leadership positions if there is a man in place for that. If there are ministries that there's nobody in charge, if there's nobody there in charge of that, then I could see myself at least doing it until somebody steps up.

Despite Sarah's insistence that she is not a leader, she still serves the people in her church and community through music. To her, music is not only her area of ministry; it is the place where she feels most at home. Collins (1991) suggests that the individual level of biography, black women are free to be creative and define themselves. This is evident in Sarah's description of how she feels about her music ministry:

Music to me is like breath. It's just to something that I have to have and something that I have to do. I feel instead of having white blood cells and red blood cells, I have bass notes and quarter notes flowing through my veins. That to me is how I worship. Different people have different ways that they worship. Some people pray. Mine is music. That's the median I know. If I have to tell God something, I can tell it to Him in a song and He'll accept that. Because it's coming from the most sincere place I can get it to come from.

#### *The Aware: Self-definition and Social Identity*

*Aware* clergywomen are highly involved in community work in their everyday lives. These experiences help to shape their self-identity as ministers. Sherease is a self-described "child of the sixties" because she comes from a family with a history of social activism in Chicago. She recalls that her Uncle's church was involved in "Operation

Push”, a non-profit organization founded by Reverend Jesse Jackson, during its initial stages. She also describes herself as a third generation minister and “preacher’s kid.” Her long-time involvement with the social change movement and lifetime church attendance converge to provide a master identity as a minister. Personally, Sherease has been involved with different levels of community church involvement such as prison, juvenile, and street ministries. Currently, she works as an independent service provider, in which she works with the county to meet the needs of the underserved in central Texas.

However, Sherease does not embrace wearing the “title” of being a minister. She feels that titles are not important for forming a self-definition. When I asked her what being a minister means to her identity she replied:

It doesn’t mean anything to my identity. Being a minister is not ... how do I say it? From an external position, it’s a title. From an internal position, it’s who I am. I’m going to minister, whether I have a title or not. If you stop me, I’m going to be in some form of ministry. I’m going to talk about the things that God would have me to do. I may not necessarily use the word Jesus. I may not quote any scripture. But because I know that that’s the only response to whatever your concerns may be, that’s going to be the path of our conversation.

For Sherease, who comes from two generations of preachers/pastors and a history of social activism, being in ministry and service is a way of life. Therefore, she does not feel the need to use an official title to define what she has known and done all her life. However, Sherease had been ordained and promoted to the position of associate pastor by a male pastor in a Baptist church while in her twenties, only to have that privilege later revoked without explanation.

Sherease is undergoing minister training at her current church and she says, “This season in her life is a time to refocus and re-establish some things.” At the time of the study, she was a candidate for ordination in her local church. Sherease expected to undergo the ceremony later that year at the age of 56, some 30 years after acknowledging her call to the ministry. Despite the lack of support from other clergymen in her call to the ministry early on in life, she has a rich and long history as a religious leader and community activist. These experiences, not the title, form the basis of her identity.

Sherease’s contact with Operation Push and the social change movement in Chicago during the 1960s to 1980s explains her approach to being a minister. This era and region was marked by the philosophical approach of combining theology and social justice to effect change for African American people (Rainbow Push Coalition 2014). This explains Sherease’s approach for helping a mother of four while on her job:

I have a client that I haven’t been able to provide service for probably six months now, yet they still call me. Let something go on, let something happen. Why? Because even though I was never able to implement the program the way the county wanted it. I was able to implement it in the way that the client could take it and receive it. That became ministry. Here you have a young mother with four kids, of a Hispanic background, and the issue of cultural differences. You have to learn to shift. You can’t bring an Anglo mindset into a Hispanic culture, and try to get the results that you want. You have to hear what that culture is. You have to hear what God is saying. You have to be sensitive to what he’s saying, and minister to the people.

Here, Sherease articulates the contrast between dominant ideologies and cultural practices and she’s able to bridge the gap between the two using her spiritual beliefs and activist experience to bring about social change. Thus, her *outsider within* perspective and womanist practice of “loving folk and commitment to community” intersect to form her self-definition and social identity.

Barbara, the Christian radio and conference host, says, “[m]inistry is a way of life.” She considers herself an agent of reconciliation bringing people back to God. The theme common to most of the women in this study is the sense that there is no separation between their personal lives and what they do as ministers. Barbara confirms this belief by describing the moment that she came to this realization while in college:

When I went off to do my masters, I took a course called “God’s Way to an A,” and it radically changed my life. I remember writing or saying that if it was possible to be born again, I would say I was born again, again, and again. The main principle that God gave the instructor of the course to teach was there’s no separation between secular and sacred. That’s a big part of the root of how I think and how my world is framed. You put that with the piece of chicken and leave the bone. That’s one of those things that frames my world is that there’s no division. I see everybody in that ... whether you embrace your ministry or fully understand all what God is doing is one thing. But I see life as ministry. If you are born again, life is ministry. Whatever your life is, is ministry—it’s ministry to your kids. It’s service of the gospel through Christ to others. That’s what I consider ministry.

She practices this belief in the fusion between sacred and secular at her current position in training and development at a local burger chain in central Texas. Like Sherease, she says that her philosophical approach toward ministry is an applied approach that allows her to fulfill her role as a minister even while on her job. For female ministers who are bi-vocational, the role of minister is not just a job that ends when they leave the church, the role assumes a master identity that subsumes all other social statutes such as race, class, and gender.

I believe the company that I work for, and a couple of companies that I’ve worked for doing training and development, have been companies that are what I like to call parable ministries. They are definitely filled with God’s Truths, rooted in God’s Truths, have the foundation of God’s Truths. But the interaction of the Gospel-to-man means that customer service is delivered differently. It’s delivered in such a way that people really do get thirsty to know

God. Because they're like, I know there's something there. For instance, I was taking a burger order. As a part of this, I'm cashiering for the company. I was taking this dude's burger order, and he came up like--just mean-faced, straight-faced. The Holy Spirit was like, just continue to exude kindness in your tone, your body language--just love on him in the way that you can. So I did with a burger order, which is wild, right?

At the end of the burger order, he looked at me and said, "What are you so happy about?" And I said, "Life is great. Life is good." And he said, "Well, you just made mine good today." He gave kind of a little smile, then he went right back to his straight face. That's what I mean. So helping their incoming staff to understand that culture, and that it's not just a traditional fast food place where it's all about how quickly you can get your food and how quickly I can give it to you. That's the role that I'm playing in helping to share those thoughts and train people who are in that culture.

Her understanding that her role as a minister outweighs any other social status that she occupies shapes Barbara's self-definition. In short, there is no separation between the sacred and secular. This allows her to move effortlessly between multiple identities without leaving behind her religious beliefs. Likewise, Jackie describes herself as a servant of God and says that He uses her on the job to assist people that come in a need spiritual help.

#### *The Critical: Self-definition and Social Identity*

Critical clergywomen often encounter negative experiences while fulfilling their roles as ministers. However, they are able to maintain a positive self-identity and use their encounters with gender challenges (sexism) as a platform for empowerment and advocacy. Althea is a 42-year-old central Texas native, and licensed vocational nurse. She says that she grew up poor on the east side of town and didn't really know who she was. This fact was further exacerbated when she transferred to a school on the north side of town that was predominantly white. "I was alone in that environment, and dark-

skinned. I was poor living in the projects, I didn't have any connections and didn't wear the latest fashions or anything like that. So I always felt a little pushed back.” During childhood, Althea experienced race and class oppression, which shaped her identity throughout early adulthood. However, her spirituality and her role as a minister have transformed her self-perception and, like other women in the study, has become her master identity:

Being a minister means that I am a servant for the Lord. I do the work and the will of my Father. Being a minister is not something that you turn on when you walk into the church. It is a 24 hours, seven days a week, 365, sometimes 366 days a year duty. It's everywhere. When I go into the grocery store, I'm always thinking, "Lord, who do you want me to minister to?" I don't care if I go to pump gas. My mind is always on the Lord and because of that, I know that I'm here for a reason. It is something that I take to heart. I think and I know people will use it vaguely and say we all are ministers. I think it's how you take it into your heart. If you really believe that you are called to be a minister, then it is a 24 hour, seven days a week job.

Her perception of her role as a minister as an everyday, year-round job combined with her self-description as a servant converges to form the master identity. Through this identity shift, she has found a love of self, and consequently a love for others.

As you recall, Kathy is an ordained pastor of a radically inclusive church, whose congregation is mostly comprised of members from the LGBTQI community. She believes in what she describes as “the ministry of presence” through which she and her congregants do volunteer work for local organizations that service gay and lesbian youth and provides AIDS services in the central Texas region. Kathy's self-definition is informed by multiple roles and by how she perceives the ministry work that she provides for marginalized groups:

For me, being a minister means believing in my identity. To me, I guess being a minister is just serving. It's also using a platform to convey a specific message. We all just have really one song. We all have really one message; each person who's called has essentially one message, and every sermon we give, and every act of service we give, is a pretext for that one message. Ezekiel, he had a certain message. Jeremiah, the prophet, everybody has a certain message. My message is the unconditional love and acceptance of God for everyone, equally. For me, because I'm heterosexual, and I'm African-American, and I'm female ... I have a space of privilege as a heterosexual.

I have that for my identity, but I'm also a woman who has the intersection of her race and her gender. I understand what it means to be marginalized.

For me, ministry and my call is just an extension of all of the experiences that my identities have; the gifts they have given me, but also the struggles that I've had. It really informs what I believe about God. I don't ... I can't see the life of Christ without looking through the lenses of a sister; of a black woman, who knows oppression ... looking through the lenses of a woman who knows exclusion, looking through the lens of a divorced person who knows what it means to be ostracized in certain communities.

Kathy sees herself as a servant and messenger of unconditional love and equality for everyone. Her self-definition as a messenger of equality is informed by her experiences within the matrix of domination. Yet she still maintains a high level of self-esteem. She finds overcoming these experiences empowering and uses her multiple identities and marginalized experiences as a platform to empower others.

I have come to understand that the reason why God calls a woman ... a black woman ... is because we have a different experience with God than a white man, or a black man, or whatever. What would be the point of being called as a woman, if you just get up there and say the same stuff men do? What's the point of being called as a woman? As an African American ... you just regurgitate the same stuff Joel Osteen does; not that I don't like him, I like Joel Osteen. God didn't call me to be that person. God called me to be a sister who grew up poor, first-generation student, and someone who had to have had all these experiences; that's what I bring with me. I understand that. I also understand that the voices of women were suppressed in the word. We don't hear

those stories. I think women have an obligation to bring the stories of women to life, and to ask the question, “Where was the woman?”

When I asked Kathy what’s it like to be an African American woman in ministry she replied:

It’s soulful. What I mean by that is, it’s a way of bringing all of yourself to the table. I can move from within and out of certain dialects in my approach to preaching. In my approach to the text, I can bring cultural and a womanist perspective to it. It’s the place I feel most myself, to be frank. I’m very spiritual, and I have been since I was a girl. I’m very ... I really like who I am, as a black woman. I like ... I love being an African-American woman. It feels rich and earthy, and it feels very organic, in terms of bringing that with me in the space of who I am as a preacher, or as a minister.

As a member in the *Critical* category, Kathy is the first and only self-identified womanist and clearly understands that she is most able to create a self-definition at the individual level of biography. “She loves struggle, *Loves* the Folks, and Loves herself. *Regardless.*” (Walker 1983: xii)

Yvonne shares a similar perspective to Kathy. As an ordained minister and college administrator with a Master in Communication Studies, she identified herself as a feminist. Yvonne says that her journey to a self-identity has evolved over time.

When I was in my early twenties the idea of being a minister was scary because it was a threat to my gender identity and my role in society. Having that role wasn’t initially recognized by my family. However, over time more family members began to recognize me in that role which helped me feel more comfortable with myself. But as a wife, it was, again, difficult to balance the two roles. Now, I see ministry as part of everyday life. It’s in the way that I talk and act even at work. I don’t feel fragmented inside and I don’t see any separation in my roles.

Yvonne no longer feels fragmented about her self-identity and sees her role as a minister as part of who she is in her everyday life. However, how she perceives her role as a

minister is also shaped by how she believes other perceive her. As a woman who left a denomination that didn't support women in leadership roles to pursue the call, Yvonne still finds the experience of being a black woman in ministry difficult:

How that feels in one word is--oppressive. Because as much as I have seen different denominations and changes in churches and acceptance of women ministers I still see and feel the constraints of being a being a black woman in ministry. Mostly because whether it's religious ideology or societal ideology there is still this very, very strong wish and hope and want that man would be the stalwarts of leadership. So if I am a woman in leadership, I am constrained not to show characteristics that are male in leadership. So even if I'm preaching the gospel authoritatively there is a certain way that the church expects a woman to give the gospel. Because it's acceptable for man to call you on your mess, tell you need to get it right, and it feels more universally accepted. But if a woman calls you on your mess it seems to be that she was just talking to the women.

Yvonne describes how gender role expectations for women come into conflict with the expectations of their roles as ministers. The reason why is because ministers are presumed to be men and therefore expectations for ministers have masculine traits embedded into the role. Yvonne goes on to reference how her education has impacted her understanding of relations of ruling and gender role expectations:

Now as someone who again has a master's degree in communication studies, I did study the women's rights movement. I continue to see what I learned and read about with the women's rights movement, of it is difficult for women to speak to mixed audiences. Also, I have to look a certain way, I have to dress a certain way, in order to appear feminine and be feminine. And if I have to do things that are confrontational then I need the validation of having a man with me and that part is sometimes very challenging. Having been raised in an urban setting, and dealing with what I consider a very patriarchal father, he knew enough to let me know that as a woman I was going to have to work twice as hard as any man, as a black woman I may have to work 3 to 4 times as hard as any man does.

For Yvonne, being a minister is her master identity. However, she reveals the complex negotiation processes that women in ministry engage in with male clergy to be able function in their roles. Yvonne's experiences further demonstrate the *outsider within* perspective that black female religious leaders develop as they "stand inside yet outside the gates" (Riggs 2003:83) of male-dominated religious circles. Clergywomen like Yvonne are aware of the dominant sexist-religious ideologies used to exclude women from structural positions of leadership. However, they are able to create counter-narratives that help to define their roles as ministers.

Renee is the 42-year-old lead pastor and founder of her own church in a rural town in central Texas. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English, she's a wife, mother, has served as school board president and is currently running for state representative. Renee is only one of two clergywomen in this study that is not bi-vocational, meaning that she serves as a full-time pastor. Although she is involved in politics, she says that the position does not require one hundred percent of her time:

I don't work outside of the ministry, and I think that's a privilege to be able to do that because I know a lot of pastors, especially males, with smaller congregations have to work outside of the church vocation. I consider it a blessing not to have to do that. It allows me to be able to, like the scripture says, "Give myself to prayer, study, and work," and then just being available to the people within the congregation, the parishioners. I get to just do full time ministry, but I'm involved in politics. I was a school board president here in my city, and I'm running for state representative now.

But those things still are not full time jobs, even though they really are. If I go somewhere else and do something in a political realm, it's to be a light in that place. It helps me stay centered so that I'm not thinking I need to do this or do that, or compromise this or parch this message because people are going to receive it the wrong way, or not post this particular message on the Internet because I said this particular thing that might be offensive to this

group. My whole purpose in going into that arena is to be a light. It's a privilege to be able just to be able to focus mainly on ministry.

Although Renee occupies multiple roles, she considers ministry to be her passion. She claims her role as a minister as her master identity and believes that her purpose while functioning in other roles within her community is to be a light.

It is everything that I am. Before I'm a woman, I'm a minister. Before I'm anything else, I'm a minister. Everything else I do, but ministry is what I am. Everywhere that I am I'm ministering, everything that I do is ministry. I think that's really what forms my identity, because that's what I am. I'm a minister of reconciliation. I'm a representative of God, I'm the reflection of Jesus in the earth, I'm a reflection of His kingdom in the earth, and it just colors everything else that I do.

Destiny is a lay minister, and a hospital administrator with a Master's in Business Administration (concentration in health care). She is divorced and has raised her son as a single mother for the last eight years. Although she claims the role of a minister as her master identity, my conversation with her revealed the sometimes-burdensome nature of the role:

Even when I want to separate from it, I can't. It's funny because I think when you ask me that, I immediately thought about my role as a mother. I was a single mother parenting my son for 18 years, until he left the house. Even though I am always going to be his mother, that role stopped. That role stopped, if that makes any difference. With ministering, even after you put the mic down and step out of the pulpit, that role doesn't stop. It becomes embedded in who I am, no matter where I go. It seems like they can find me, even when I don't want to be found. It's the part of my identity that even when I try to hide it sometimes, God will put a light behind you and you just glow.

It's a hard walk. It's a lonely walk sometimes. As soon as you confess that you are a minister, of course, it comes with all the glamor and glory, and they see you in the pulpit--you know, all of that. But then they don't know the loneliness behind it, the pressure that God's people will put on you to have that perfect walk. It's the pressure to say the right things, to be encouraged all

the time. Sometimes there are some days I am looking for my faith. It's hard to believe, and people don't understand that, as a minister, that you cry, that you hurt.

Destiny describes the life-changing event that changed her perception of her role as a minister. Here she articulates the challenge of being a minister and the amount of self-sacrifice that is expected of those who occupy the role:

I really didn't realize that until I lost my father. A lot of people would say, "Don't cry. It will be alright." Well, right now it hurts. I am not the minister. I am the daughter, and I'm going through that pain. I think there are just certain times where I don't want the stereotype to be put on me, the pressure, the pedestal. I would like to be able to turn it off when I want to. Sometimes I just want to hang with the girlfriends, and God will give me a prophetic word, and I'm having a conversation like, "God why?" Really why? Those are the times where I just wish I could just turn it off ... like it was a switch, but it's not.

Destiny's candor about the demands that the role places on her everyday life reveals that the "light," which is seen as mostly positive and as an inseparable part of her identity, reveals the tension within to find a unified self. Her self-definition serves as a counter-narrative to the controlling images of black women as the "happy slave" the "self-less mammy" or the "super strong black mother" (Collins 1991). Though she enjoys her role as a minister, she sees herself as fully human with a full range of emotions. Further, while black women are not separatist, they periodically need to retreat for self-recovery (Walker 1983).

Pauline is a 69-year-old ordained pastor and licensed practical nurse (LPN) who holds a Doctorate of Theology. Pauline's road to pastoring a church is an unconventional one in which she says that is "pastoring by default." She worked alongside her husband in ministry (also a pastor) at her father-in-law's church for several years before her husband was arrested for interstate drug trafficking in 1995. For many years after her

husband's arrest, she continued to attend and serve in the same church. She watched as several other ministers serve as the senior leader at her father-in-law's church, she was finally voted in as pastor in 2001. She has served as the senior leader ever since.

When I asked Pauline what being a minister meant to her identity, she was able to articulate, in a profound way, why African American women are willing to function in their role as ministers despite having to work within an oppressive environment and the self-sacrifice that the role requires:

Being a minister means being a servant ... a servant of all. Because you have to put everybody's needs and whatever, like, ahead of yourself. It ain't just because it's a good idea. It's really in you, and you're not ... at least, I'm not comfortable or feel good or whatever about mine being met if I know something is lacking or missing or...

So Jesus said, "He that would be great among you, let him be the servant of all." And I think that is probably etched into the heart of ministers, you know? You really feel that, as a minister, but then, and I say, a lot of times, that's like a mother, too. If you got children, you know, you might see something you want and need, but if you know they need something, they get theirs first.

Pauline poignantly summarizes the dialectical tension between the self-defined master identity of being a minister, and the negative experiences that often accompany functioning in that role as a black woman:

People almost make you ashamed to say you're a minister, you know? I don't know...there might be something disgraceful, almost, if you say you're a woman and a preacher. Some people say "God ain't got no women preachers." That's not everybody, but when you have to deal with the ones that do think that way, they can be cold and cruel.

Pauline confesses that the maternal and spiritual drive that she has as a minister is greater than the embarrassment or shame that comes from functioning in a role where women are not received.

Erica, the ordained pastor and hospital chaplain, sees herself as a servant-leader. Her experiences in ministry include working with indigent populations and providing end of life support for patients and their families. Being a minister (and subsequently the experiences), has [have] transformed her self-identity and shapes the way she sees herself, as well as the way she perceives that others see her:

It still means that I am Erica. It means that it's Erica who is saved. It means Erica who still needs the grace and mercy of God, but because she has had a personal encounter or a Damascus Road encounter accosted me. I believe in God. I was raised in the church, but I wasn't seeking to do ministry. I wasn't seeking to tell *one* soul about Jesus Christ. I may have told them there's a program on Sunday on like family and friends day or women in red, but I wasn't one who was seeking to evangelize or to be a light.

Ministry has become to me, a place of wholeness and balance--nothing lacking and nothing missing--and self-reflection. God ordained steps in my life that I am not in control of, but it is not an image anymore. I had hardline images of what ministry meant. I dressed a certain way, I talked a certain way, I preached, and I was anointed (laughing and speaking in a preaching tone)--and I was every day--and that is not real! Because life comes and it hits you, and turns you sometimes upside down. So when I began to embrace having kindness, having empathy, having forgiveness toward people, and being forgiving of myself, and I believe when I can be transparent and transcend myself with someone and walk with them as Jesus did, and be a servant leader, that became ministry to me.

Erica sees her role as a minister as part of her everyday life and as an experience that has transformed her self-definition. Like other clergywomen in this study, Erica has a positive self-esteem and realizes how race, class, and gender shapes her experiences compared to other women:

Being a black woman in ministry is uniquely universal. They are both. Within my community, we are hated and loved. In the white community, we are maybe not understood, but more respected, even if they don't understand us. Other women of other colors that

are in ministry, we share the same struggle. It's hard for women in ministry, being in any environment, by male dominated leadership, so we share some similar things, but then because of color, it splits again.

Erica's *outsider within* stance allows her to identify differences between herself and her white counterparts. Her theory of "uniquely universal" captures the complex nature of the matrix of domination confirming that while all women may experience domination, the dimensions of race and class lead black women down divergent paths of oppression.

In summary, clergywomen in each category the *Unaffected*, the *Aware*, and the *Critical*, have a self-definition based on their roles as ministers. As Black Feminist theory suggests, the self for black women is found in the context of family and community and is rooted in African American traditions (Collins 1991; Walker 1983; Williams 1987). Further, womanist theology adds that African American religious women find meaning by situating their experiences within the context of Biblical texts (Williams 1987). The well-known gospel song "This Little Light of Mine" written by Henry Dixon Loes (1920) as a simple song to teach Sunday school children and was perhaps loosely based on the teachings of Christ that equate good works (service) to mankind. The song took on special meaning in the black community when activist Fannie Lou Hammer adopted it as part of the Civil Rights movement (Christiansen 2014).

The song emerged over time to carry both sacred and secular meanings in the black community in which people derive a basis for service to their fellow man through theological teaching of Christ. Although variations of the song have emerged over time, they all emphasize the ever-present nature of "the light" which indicates that it must be seen and demonstrated in all phases of life and every space that it occupies. As such, many of the women in this study refer to their service in ministry as being a light. For

black women, being a light means that they derive meaning in connection-with not opposition-to others.

I use a womanist lens to analyze their self-perceptions and activities in their role as ministers because they use Biblical texts and spiritual narratives rooted in the African American traditions of social justice and service to God to find personal meaning and context for their experiences. In each category of clergywomen, their church involvement and spirituality make it possible for them to create counter narratives by defining themselves as beacons of light, messengers of social justice and God's unconditional love, servants, vessels, representatives, and a blessing to people in need. Thus, despite their difficulties and the sometimes-negative perceptions others have of them they are able to maintain a positive self-esteem. Consequently, they develop an *outsider within* perspective in which they resist dominant ideologies concerning black women in the media, the church, and the larger community.

At the individual level of biography, they resist religious, class, gender, and race domination through self-definition (Collins 1991). Each clergywoman has a different social location, which includes her marital status, education, age, ethnicity, and ordination status. The more women experience gender oppression at this level, the more likely they are to identify as a feminist or with feminist ideals. As such, clergywomen in the *Critical* category reported having more experiences with gendered oppression, because of the social context of their experiences. Therefore, for clergywomen in this category there is a divergent experience from the other two categories, which results in a more critical perspective of church structure.

Women in the *Critical* category are more exposed to gender oppression than women in the *Unaffected* and *Aware* category because they function at higher levels of structural power within the church. For example, most of them are ordained and/or are founders of their own churches and non-profit religious ministries. Further, although this sample is a highly educated group, women in the *Critical* category hold terminal degrees and higher levels of theological and seminary training. Additionally, many of the *Critical* clergywomen are single or divorced, statuses that give them a unique perspective because they do not have the luxury of relying on a male partner to validate their call. Subsequently, women in this category identified as womanist/feminist and articulated feminist perspectives concerning their experience in their roles as minister.

To recapitulate, the clergywomen in all three categories have a self-definition based on their perception of their roles as ministers, regardless of their ordination status and various social locations. The role of minister serves as a master identity and forms the basis of how they see themselves, and ultimately what they do in their everyday lives. Ultimately, the clergywomen's social location and their experiences create divergent perspectives for women in all three categories.

#### PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES: NAMING OPPRESSION

*...tis' woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice. It would be subversive of every human interest that the cry of one-half the human family be stifled.*

*Her cause is linked with that of every agony that has been dumb-every wrong that needs a voice (Anna Julia Cooper 1892).*

As participants in this study “come to voice,” they move from defining the self to naming their oppression (Collins 1991). My conversations with these clergywomen reveal that they still face a number of challenges at the level of cultural context created by

their experiences of being a pastor, being female, and being black. There are two reasons why they experience gendered challenges in nondenominational churches. First, even though the clergywomen may be free from formal and informal denominational policies that have historically prohibited women from structural positions of power and leadership, the ideologies used to justify their exclusion are still present within the minds of churchgoers. In other words, churchgoers bring old cultural, traditional, and sexist ideologies into the new nondenominational settings.

Secondly, nondenominational churches have connections and interactions with denominational churches where women preachers may still be uncommon and unwelcome. Consequently, many of the clergywomen preach in church settings that may accept them as itinerant preachers but do not fully accept their status as pastors, apostles, and bishops of their own churches. Additionally, clergywomen that are senior pastors of their own churches still find themselves having to justify their call and positions of leadership to skeptical parishioners and their parishioners' family and friends.

I argue that while black female clergywomen may not report experiencing gendered challenges, they still operate under a patriarchal structure present at the institutional level, which permeates through every aspect of the everyday lives of women. Epstein (2007) argues that gender is the most basic social divide and the most prevalent global social category. The classification of gender is based on the category of sex, which is assigned upon birth and places individuals in a lifelong category with prescribed roles, privileges, expectations, and responsibilities (Epstein 2007). However, factors such as social location and one's awareness of the patriarchal structure affect an individual's experiences and perceptions about that structure. In short, as Collins

(1991:227) suggests “the same situation can look quite different depending on the consciousness one brings to it.”

As stated in the typology of speakers, the types of struggles were different for each category of women, which resulted in three different perspectives, and different ways that each group discussed the themes that emerged in the data. Only one clergywoman in the *Unaffected* category reported experiencing gendered challenges. Clergywomen in the *Aware* category reported experiencing gender and race challenges but they used their spirituality and faith as a means of self-empowerment (power to) to negotiate male opposition. Clergywomen in the *Critical* category also reported that they experienced gendered challenges. However, they also acknowledged gender oppression and the patriarchal structure of religious institutions at the systemic level as the cause for their plight. To overcome these challenges, they use self-empowerment (power to) and collective action (power with) to create change in the social and political structure of the church.

#### *Challenges of the Unaffected*

To reiterate, clergywomen in the *Unaffected* category did not express gender struggles as a primary concern. They are not affected by relations of ruling within the church, but instead they report that their challenges are more spiritual in nature. I asked each woman what have been their greatest challenges in ministry as a black woman. Dawn recalled two separate occasions in which she experienced spiritual challenges. The first experience she described as a time in which she attended a church that was losing membership and she helplessly watched her pastors suffer through this difficult time. In the second experience, Dawn recalls attending a church where she felt uncomfortable

with other church members and the pastor of the church. Other than that, she has an optimistic view of women in ministry and she does not believe that there are any obstacles for any woman who enters the clergy:

I think now, the pathway has been made for African American women to go even further in the body of Christ, as far as ministry is concerned. They can do whatever God has called them to do. Whatever area He's called them to work in, they do it to the fullest. What God has for you, can't nobody take that away from you and what he wants you to have, you're going to have it. If he wants you to be a pastor, you a pastor, right? Couldn't nobody stop you from that, so I'm just a firm believer in that. To me, I haven't experienced, I guess I should say, a lot of opposition and I haven't been out there may be enough to experience it. But to me, it's like, hey, this is me, I'm going to do what God's called me to do. If I get an invitation to go somewhere, I do that to the best I can and boom, I'm out of there.

It is important to note that Dawn admits that she may not have experienced gendered challenges because she has not had much experience in her career as a preacher or pastor. Regardless, Dawn attributes her status and activities as a minister to the will of God and she believes that any woman that has a call on her life will succeed with God's help.

Deniece, the worship leader and recording artist, experienced spiritual challenges. Deniece shared a time that she experienced challenges in her music ministry. She remembers being in a church with unsupportive pastors (a husband and wife team) who discouraged her from singing and recording music outside of church. She attributes this to the fact that the church was part of a denomination.

Sarah leads worship in church, but she does not consider herself a leader. She believes that women in leadership positions go against what she describes as the "natural protocol." For Sarah, the natural protocol means that man is the head of woman and

women can only hold leadership positions in the church if there is no man to fulfill that role. However, when I asked her about her greatest challenges she replied:

My greatest challenge, personally, is letting men lead in leadership positions. But that's only because I have ... My husband calls it OCD (Over Compulsive Disorder). I'm a perfectionist. When it comes to ministry, there are just certain things that I want and there's just a certain way that I want it. I know that it's not going to be that way unless I do it. It's not going to come out exactly the way I want done unless I do it. But I can't always do it because I'm not in that position. To me, that's my biggest challenge--only because I'm such a perfectionist, especially when it comes to my music ministry.

Sarah's comments seemed contradictory. Even though Sarah accepts a God ordained order of leadership, she said that she has a problem with letting men lead. Despite the fact that Sarah has very definite ideas about what she likes, and how she would like to get things done, she insists that it is not her place to function in a leadership role. Ultimately, I was not sure if Sarah internalized her husband's assessment of being a perfectionist to justify her frustration with male leadership or if she really believes that only men should lead.

Vanessa is the only minister in the *Unaffected* group who experienced challenges at the intersection of gender and race, but she is also the only ordained pastor in the group:

"Look, she's a woman and she's black." (Laughter) "And she talks differently." I could be in a meeting and some guy will say something derogatory and I'll say to myself see, "Right there." It doesn't matter, especially within religious circles. You can tell sometimes how people are thinking and stuff but that's okay, I understand. It doesn't matter to me. You know? Whatever! It's not really an obstacle because God's going to take me and my husband where we need to go anyway so we're not controlled by what they think. Wherever He wants us to go, we'll go and wherever He doesn't, we won't go.

Vanessa has acquired a unique angle of vision concerning herself as a woman working within a male dominated position. She is not immune to the comments, glances, and stares that she receives as a black female pastor. However, she is certain the God will take care of her and direct her ministry and her life.

### *Challenges of the Aware*

Clergywomen in the *Aware* category have an *awareness* of gender oppression in the church based on first-hand experiences. The *Aware* clergywomen rely on God to validate their call rather than themselves. LaShawn is a 41-year-old ordained minister who pastors a church with her husband in Southeast Texas and has “strong Creole roots from Louisiana.” LaShawn and her husband also run a petroleum engineer consulting company. She is a busy mother of two nine-month-old twins, a 21 year old, and she sadly reports that her second child (who would now be 19) died of a rare skin disease. LaShawn shared that she has experienced gendered challenges. However, she did not say that those challenges were her greatest:

Having been exposed to both exclusively African-American settings and inter-racial settings, I have not encountered a difference in being an African-American woman in ministry versus any other ethnic race in ministry. If anything, perhaps there has been a greater respect from other ethnic groups since the general impression is our race (African American Women) has a strong spiritual history. What I have witnessed in both settings is a gender prejudice more than an ethnic prejudice. There are many settings that see women ministries as inferior or of lesser value than men in ministry.

My greatest challenge in ministry has been grasping the concept of times and seasons. In the past, as soon as I had a thought, I felt the plan had to be immediately executed. As a result there were projects that were not as successful because the timing nor the season was right. This led to great frustration and a sense of failure when indeed the only failure was not understanding timing.

For LaShawn, the spiritual challenge of knowing the right time to implement plans, not waiting too long or moving too soon, is her greatest challenge.

Jackie has also experienced gendered challenges but like LaShawn these are not her greatest challenges. She says that part of the struggle of being a black woman in ministry is “being accepted”:

As a black woman, it's hard being accepted. Like I said before, when you realize who you are, it's not an issue. I could go on along with everybody saying women aren't supposed to be preachers, but I know what He called me to do. I don't get in arguments. That's silly to me. To argue means God ain't who He says He is, and I haven't really accepted what He says. I don't have those battles. I don't even go there, because I know.

However, Jackie says that her greatest challenge is the inability to empower women and give them a more positive mindset:

For me... it's frustrating ...getting the woman to realize who she is. Getting her to see who she is in Christ, and who she can be. That right there. It's frustrating. The challenges of mindset. If I could just climb inside their heads and get them to really see who they are. That's one of the most ... I don't want to say what I do is a breeze ... but with Christ, it's easy. I don't want to make it seem like it's a cake walk. To get the woman to just change her mindset so she can experience the power ... If she could just get a little bit of that power. All it takes is a little. Once you get a little, you're going to want more of it. Can you imagine? If women would really get it... if we really, truly knew who we are, do you know what this nation would be like?

As I spoke with Jackie, she was moved to tears. She spoke to me very personally and would periodically touch my arm. It was clear from Jackie's enthusiasm that empowering women is her passion. She believes that empowering women involves helping them to develop a more positive mindset. She also commented that she wants women to know that they too can be ministers. However, as a clergywoman who pastors

with her husband, Jackie believes that it is important for women in ministry to follow a God established order:

I think it's important that the woman be covered. This is the way I feel. I know God established the order at the very beginning, and the Bible clearly says that man is the head. I think if the woman would just respect that—be respectful in that. If you're respectful in that, you shouldn't have any problems, but a lot of women have disrespected in that area. My thing is, just be in the order of God. Respect those that are over you. You've got to be able to lead and be led. A good leader is also going to have to understand that they've got to submit, too. Not all the time are you going to be the leader. God, of course, is the main covering. After that, my covering is, of course, my husband. However, I believe that a woman should have a head over her that supports her and then gives her wings to fly without sitting something on her. Not so he can say "You got to hush at this moment or you can't talk." No. I believe when it's of God, everything is going to work out. You do have a lot of women that are women pastors that pastor their husbands. I can't argue with that. If that's of God, if God allows it, who am I to argue with that? It doesn't mean that she don't have her husband as covering.

Like Sarah, Jackie believes in a natural protocol or God ordained order that places man as the head of woman. However, unlike Sarah, Jackie acknowledges her role as a leader and believes that other women are qualified to lead in the church as well. Despite the gendered challenges that she has faced, Jackie believes that God will advocate for her as a woman in ministry.

Barbara has had a long and successful career as itinerant preacher and Christian radio/TV host. Although she does not identify with a denomination, she continues to attend her family's Baptist church where her father is the pastor:

I guess one of the greatest challenges/obstacles has been... being taken seriously. You get swept to the side a lot and you get a lot less recognition...which I've come to learn is a great thing. (Laughs) If I were a dude doing what I do...I think I would have more credibility in the religious community. People (including myself) probably would have pressured me to wear titles and be

formally approved with ordination and expected me to take on a titled leadership role at my dad's church etc. I've dealt with the challenges just by, to the best of my ability, following the lead of the Holy Spirit. I'm only here to be influenced by Him for God's Kingdom agenda. Whatever that looks like and however that plays out...nothing else really matters anymore. I will only be answering to one Maker anyway. So, I just keep it moving!

Barbara's social location as a woman and a lay minister provides the context for how she creates meaning for her experiences. She realizes that if she were a man she might have a different experience that would give her access to more privileges, authority, and opportunities. Thus, she has developed an *outsider within* perspective concerning her role as a minister.

Sherease has experienced challenges at the intersection of class, race and gender. In my conversation with Sherease, she shared that when she would preach, men would sometimes challenge her sermon and preaching skills. She attributes this to the fact that she studies the Bible diligently and her sermons contain a feminine and maternal perspective with which men are not familiar, which causes her male counterparts to become jealous. She believes that the church structure is imbalanced because of the absence of the female voice and perspective:

Those were the conflicts that I saw with women who were coming in. Some of them sisters were going at it. They were preaching the word, and they were studying. The other thing that I was challenged on with the men is that they forget that we have a sensitive nature. We're nurturers. When we go looking for the word, we're looking for it from a whole different perspective. They come from a protective and providing perspective. With most people when you look at things, your natural inclination is going to say, "OK where does that fit in with who I am gender-wise?" I said one time that the church was impotent, because it was in a divorce, there was never a mom. The majority of the church has never got the balance. We were single-sided. We were raised with this paternal daddy mindset, but where was mom? The spirit of the mother, the nurturing; it was missing.

Here, Sherease is comparing the negotiation process among men and women in the church to a failed marriage. Essentially, she is comparing church to a child in the middle of a divorce that has been deprived of a maternal influence. Sherease continues her passionate analogy and extends it the realm of childbearing. As she continues, she begins to speak as if there was a man present with us in the interview:

You didn't ... you can't get pregnant and give birth. That aspect of, when a baby is in the womb, of the spirit of the church, you don't have a clue. You can provide it; you can protect it, but you don't know what's going on in that maturation of spirit from conception to birth. You need us to speak to that. You need us to talk to that. You need us to remind you. When you're sitting there rubbing your wife's belly, that's cool, but your wife is getting kicked on the inside. Her body is restructuring. Her nutritional levels are being imbalanced. Her emotions are going off. She'll never be the same, because of what's happened. How can you not let that be in the body of Christ?

Sherease recognizes the need for women to speak and to have their perspective and contributions present in the church. She believes that the church has suffered because of this "single-sided" approach. Despite the fact that she has experienced gendered challenges within the church, she also believes in a similar "order of things" as do Jackie and Sarah. Sherease describes order in this way, "I try teaching ... that the Lord, says first there is God, then there's men, and then women. That is the context by which I say order." Her perspective on hierarchy within society and the church is guided by this order as well as a socio-historical interpretation of relations of ruling between black men and women in relation to white society:

In ministry, because ... even the dynamics of our culture, as African-American women period ... we've been given some leniencies that our male counterparts haven't in America. That's already established some ego issues with our brothers. It seems easier for us to flow in this country than it is for them. That's not

by our dynamics. That's because of social injustice and imbalance. It breeds and filters over into different areas

As a result, Sherease feels that is important to make sure that black men are placed at the head of the church and the African American community:

There were a lot of women that wanted me ... it was interesting, because men wouldn't let a lot of women behind their pulpits, but I always had favor. The sisters would see that, and they'd want me to join them, kind of like a clique. I'm like, "No, because you're trying to validate your call, based on the favor. No, let God give you favor, and wherever God opens up the door, that's really where you want to go." I'm not going to get in this fight against men about, "Did God call women?" I would exalt men. I would put them in their place. The word of God says that there is an order; keep the order. Even in a household of faith, keep the order. When it comes to the call, there is no gender. Because I honored them they never felt intimidated. As a result, I always had access to the pulpit.

Sherease feels that she has been able to have access to the pulpit because she follows the proper order and she leaves it to God to advocate for her calling and ministry opportunities. She feels that other women should do the same. However, when I asked Sherease about her greatest challenge in ministry as an African American woman, she indicated that it has always been financial:

I think the challenge for African-American women in ministry is the challenge for, I think, our ethnicity image overall. I say that because, having had access to other ethnicities, they are very supportive of their ministries financially, mentally, and emotionally. That has an effect upon women of color in ministry. It affects your sisters. You can take your own self, for instance. If you have all the capital, this that you're doing would be a piece of cake. You wouldn't have to worry about any other source of income. Your family wouldn't have to worry about any lack while you take a season to improve and to hone your skills, so that God can use this area. We're supposed to be in the marketplace. The ministry is not the church; we're supposed to be out there among the people. But you can't get out there among the people ... ignorant. It doesn't do any good. We're out there among the people very ignorant, but to really be out there and make an impact

... yes, it takes time. It takes revenue, so that you can sit at the master's feet and hear without the nagging bills, the broken relationships, the cultural problems, the gunshots in the neighborhood, all the things that plague us. I'm not saying we're the only ones, because everyone's got their own holocaust. I'm just speaking to the experiences that I have.

Although Sherease did not identify as a womanist or feminist, she possesses an *outsider within* perspective and her experiences confirm what black feminists have argued. Black feminists and womanists agree that because black women have always had to endure long, hard, thankless hours at work, they have accumulated very little wealth. Additionally, they have had very little time to be creative and produce theories for and by black women (Collins 1991; Walker 1983).

#### *Challenges of the Critical*

**Critical** clergywomen report experiencing gendered challenges and they critique the sexist practices of the church in its exclusion of women from the ministry. Audrey is a 55-year-old single minister with roots from the Midwest, and who has lived in Southeast Texas for the last thirty-one years. She has two undergraduate degrees, Bachelor of Theology and Business Administration. She also has a paralegal certification. She is an ordained minister who self-identifies as an Apostle, which according to Audrey is a pastor with a specialty in establishing new churches and church administration. Among Audrey's other accomplishments, she is a self-published author. A chapter in her book details her personal struggle to accept the call as a female minister and encourages other women to take up the charge to be God's representatives here on earth. During the interview, she reveals her greatest challenges:

...just the men; the men who still fight against women doing anything, especially preaching. That to me has been the biggest challenge. They tout that they accept but they don't. They say

they do really accept women--they tolerate women in ministry. However, they don't really celebrate or push women in ministry. Still, they ... especially here in Texas, I found out there's this good ole' boy club. It's like that in ministry. I found that out way back. I'm like, "Wow, you know this same mentality is over in the church when it comes to men and women in ministry." It's a different benefit levels, different invitations to preach. I went to seminary. I didn't like really seminary or theological schools like the ones in North Texas. I knew just looking at some of the curriculum and from a lot of the complaints from women pastors that I knew that they wouldn't let women take certain tracks and.

Audrey is critical of the patriarchal structure that exists both in and outside the church. Her interview reveals the divergent paths that women are forced into that deliberately keep them from the path of ordination. However, as an ordained minister and founder of her own ministry, she has an *outsider within* perspective that allows her to see the contradiction between dominant sexist ideologies within the church and her own personal accomplishments. The knowledge that Audrey gained from her experiences is transformative and empowering. In turn, she has used this knowledge to advocate for other women by hosting conferences for women and authoring a book that addresses the obstacles that women face as career clergywomen.

Renee describes the challenges that she has faced as an ordained minister of her own church from the conception of her ministry to the present day:

When I first started the ministry, I got my ordination through the parent church organization that actually would ordain women. My husband was part of a Baptist church, and so I would go preach at churches that he was involved with, but I had to preach at the little podium on the side. One of my mentors at a church that I came from under, the second church that I'd ever been to that raised me up in ministry, told me, "Never try to prove yourself, the word is the word, it stands alone. When my husband and I started the church in a rural area, there weren't any female pastors in this area, and there weren't especially any black female pastors in this area. At the time, my husband wasn't in the ministry, so people were saying all kinds of crazy stuff to him. "How is she going to be the

pastor of the church when Paul says, "We don't allow women to teach a man." Calling him soft or whatever, all that stuff that they were saying to him, just messing up theology talking about Jesus being married to the church and all this other kind of stuff.

Renee goes on to say that she did not doubt whether or not God had called her to the ministry. She only doubted whether she should become a pastor because she was familiar with resistance to women in that particular role:

Now, I had doubts about the specific office, if I was a pastor or not. I think that there was doubt because I really couldn't explain it well at first. I really wanted God to just to confirm to me that this is specifically what He wanted me to be doing now. I'm not going to argue with people but I need to be able to lay the case out so that maybe they can go look at it later and reevaluate if that's really what they want." Some people just want to argue just to argue, but if they really want to know, I will tell them. However, I want to be able to lay the case out plainly to people in general and even to explain women pastors to my congregates/parishioners. They're having people talk to them as well, because the location of my church is rural, I am black, and I am a woman. I think being black and a woman in another area that's not rural is different.

For Renee, the social contexts of geographical location, race, gender, and her social status of a pastor combine to create challenges for her, her spouse, and her congregants. Renee resists domination by creating a counter-narrative which redefines who and what a minister is and who can claim legitimate authority as a minister. She believes that it is important to acknowledge the legitimacy of her position, not only for herself, but for her congregants and for other women in ministry as well:

I think it's our responsibility as women to recognize the title. I really do, because you've got other young women that are coming up that will ... they're going to be dealing with the same cultural mores, and the same religious things that we had to deal with. But I think it makes it easier for them to step into what it is that God has called them to when they have someone who accepts the title. They don't lord the title over people, but they accept it and say, "This is who I am unapologetically; this is who God called me to be. I understand now that I have a responsibility as a black female

in ministry to admit what I am. Especially, to let younger women know. Then I know there's a lot of older women too that have not only forfeited their ministry, they're doing it, but they're doing it at a level that isn't at the level I think that they're called to operate in. They're being stifled, and I think it's freeing for them to be able to see people that are actually going into the deep and doing what it is that God called the them do, even against the opposition and the resistance that they might have to encounter.

Renee's perspective is in contrast to some of the clergywomen in the *Unaffected*, and *Aware* categories who do not believe that titles are an important part of their identity and role as a minister. Renee believes that clergywomen must wear the title as part of their claim to legitimate authority.

Claire is a 53-year-old minister who co-pastors the nondenominational church that she and her husband founded. Claire and her husband's ministry is a family affair where their two children also work alongside them. Claire's church hosts a Christian Hip Hop concert, founded by her son, every fourth Sunday in the month. When Claire recognized her call to the ministry she was apprehensive because she was still attending denominational churches that did not accept women in the ministry.

However, Claire and her husband soon left the denominational church setting and started their own ministry. This transition set the stage for her to accept her call to the ministry and become a co-pastor with her husband's encouragement and support. Therefore, she may not have had many obstacles in her journey toward ministry. Although Claire was now free from the constraints of traditional churches, she confesses that she had internalized the sexist ideologies that kept women from becoming ministers. She recalls the internal struggle that she experienced when she initially contemplated the call:

I went through a series of time where the Holy Spirit began to deal with me, and God would wake me up at night. I was writing sermons not knowing that's what I was doing. I used to write poems and things like that, but it changed to a pattern of looking up scripture and waking up at 12 am and just writing it out. I remember God speaking to me about ministry. As if God doesn't know it, I'm like "God I'm a woman." And God was like, "I know that." But in the denomination where I come from, I'd never seen women, very rarely, ever see women ministers. Therefore, God started dealing with me about it. When your environment is different, and you're not used to something, you question it.

Claire confesses that because she had allowed her consciousness to internalize oppression she had to struggle with herself and God to accept the *idea* that she could become a minister. In Claire's instance, the *idea* that women could not be ministers presented more of a challenge than did actual experiences within the church. Like other women in the *Critical* category, Claire uses Biblical texts as a counter narrative to explain and justify her call:

One thing that the Lord said to me was, "First of all, if you look in my word, when you really look at it, it's like everywhere that I've called man, sometimes they've second guessed me. Whenever I told a woman to do something, she just did it." When Jesus told Mary, "Go back and tell them." She didn't say, "What time?" She just went. Not that one's better than the other, but that was God's way of dealing with me. It was personal.

Over the years, Claire says that God has given her the confidence to execute her role as a minister. Her faith in God and her husband's support provide the necessary catalyst for her entrance into the ministry. However, part of Claire's initial hesitancy to enter ministry was partly because she never saw other women function in that role. As a result, Claire believes that it is important for her to empower other women who are considering entering the ministry:

I think it's important for women who are coming up now that they have mentors who can say, "You know what? I've been there. I

understand how you feel, but here is where you need to be and here's how you get here.” A lot of times we'll tell people to do this, but we don't tell them how to get there. We don't tell them how to get out of addiction. We don't tell them how to get out of fear or rejection. We just say do it without giving them the formula to do it, if that makes sense. I work with a pastor friend of mine who started the “Women for the War Ministry.” It's for women who are interested in ministry or women who are thinking they're called. Maybe these women want to make sure they are called or maybe just want to be mentored and have questions. During our gatherings, I tackle topics that nobody else may touch. I deal with insecurity. I deal with post-traumatic stress syndrome--that's not just for in the army. I deal with fear. I deal with everything that the Holy Spirit brings up that a woman can deal with. I teach them how to be confident in God, and in whom He's making you to be, and wherever you are right now, being comfortable there.

Claire has formed a collaborative relationship with another clergywoman to pave the political pathway to ministry so that other women “can see” what that looks like. Her stance is similar to Renee's who also believes that it is her responsibility to pave the way for other black women in ministry.

Tabitha is a 60-year-old full time pastor of her own ministry and Bible College instructor with a Doctorate in Theology. She is currently holding Sunday services in her home. However, her work in the ministry has taken her to Africa doing missionary work and crusades, and she has traveled extensively across the United States. She remarks that she has experienced challenges in ministry as a woman but admits that it has gotten better over time:

I've been in ministry for over 30 years. As difficult as it is for women today still, it was worse then. I kept thinking, “Okay, God. You're calling me to teach.” I knew better, but I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready for ...women really were persecuted if you even mention you were called to ministry then. Some women were really suffering because male ministers were just opposing them in horrible ways. That was just not something I wanted. I realized the seriousness of being in ministry so it took a while. Still ... and

even today, there are still some obstacles for women. Not as bad, but there's still some people that struggle with that.

It was a mixture. It was a mixture, but I was somewhat stronger and in the area of thinking basically like Jeremiah, the Lord would always help me. Don't be afraid of the people's faces. I'm with you. Jeremiah 1:8, I think it is. It has gotten better, but I still encounter it. For instance, I just came out of a revival a month ago. It was a very powerful revival. There were many deliverances, healings, and miracles. While there were many people there, there still was a little bit of apprehension from one pastor in particular. He wasn't rude or anything. He's still just apprehensive about a female minister, but couldn't deny the power that was in my life. There's still some out there...

In her thirty-year career as a minister, she stills experiences opposition from her male counterparts. However, like Renee and Audrey, Tabitha uses her training as minister and years of experience to advocate for women by "laying out the case" to have full rights and authority within the ministry:

People openly say they just believed that a woman can't pastor or should be ministering. They should be silent in the church life. I'll let them go through their spiel, and then I'll go and then say, "Well, have you ever done any research to find out what was going on? Why did Paul say that they needed to be silent? Did you just read the scripture and leave it at that? Or did you do some research and see why he was saying that?" Then, when I break it down to why Paul was saying that at that time. I ask "Do you know what was going on during that time? Because God has had female prophets even, and ministers as far back as Esther and Deborah. He had Anna and Priscilla, and Mary, who was the first disciple. Are you aware of this?" Then I tell them, "You have to understand that God created male and female for procreation and for man not to be alone. There is no male or female in Christ." Sometimes, depending on the individual, I ask, "Did they tear up that page in your Bible? Because in Christ, there is no gender. There is no male or female in Christ."

Tabitha recognized the need to speak out, educate, and advocate for women in ministry particularly to those who openly challenge her calling and authority. She is engaged in the culture of resistance by using her office, title, and authority to redefine

women's role within the ministry. As such, Tabitha is using a womanist approach to create a Biblical counter narrative to the patriarchal ideology that often uses Biblical texts to justify women's secondary status in the church.

Kathy is also a vocal advocate for women in ministry. As she mentioned in her interview she searches through the sacred text (the Bible) to find women in the stories and brings them to life:

What might a woman's experience have been in this context, or whatever. It is to bring a different narrative to the sacred text. The text is still sacred, I believe; but I believe the sacred rhetoric of African-American women has a place. There is something that we bring, that's different. I believe that we have to deconstruct the text.

Throughout her interview, Kathy described a number of challenges that she has faced as a woman in ministry but she also experienced gendered challenges while she was married. She says that she found it difficult to accept her call to the ministry and fulfill the role because she was concerned about causing a problem in her marriage. At the time, her husband was also a minister who "had some pretty traditional ideas about gender roles." She avoided minister training because she says "I didn't want to outshine my husband." When I asked Kathy about her greatest challenges in ministry she replied:

The greatest challenge?—Men! Men taking you as seriously as they do themselves. Men thinking, "You're out of your place." I've been invited to churches, and then they wouldn't let me get in the pulpit. I have to stand down with the low podium...yes, for sure, because of sexism. We live in a very male-oriented, dominated society, even though it's so ubiquitous we take that for granted. I say that even as women, that we have allowed masculinity to usurp our feminine imaginations. We even think through the lenses and the filters of masculinity. We internalize a lot of male-oriented, sexist, masculine concepts and ideas about things.

Kathy experienced oppression at the individual level of biography (her marriage) and at the level of cultural context (church) as an African American woman in nondenominational ministry. Because of her experiences, Kathy engages in both individual and collective acts of resistance. She uses her status as a woman in ministry to include women in her sermons and she uses the church as a safe space to advocate for women. It is no wonder then that Kathy works side by side in her ministry with another African American female clergywoman as her assistant pastor. Kathy's actions demonstrate collaboration, and solidarity.

Josephine is a 71-year-old ordained pastor of her own ministry. Like Tabitha, she has also been in ministry for 30 years. Since leaving denominational churches to become nondenominational, she has had more opportunities as a religious leader. She has traveled to Costa Rica and other countries doing mission work and evangelism. Josephine has established a prison ministry and served as its Chaplain and established an online ministry training school. Her longevity as a minister has provided her the opportunity to see conditions improve for African American women in ministry. Moreover, Josephine takes an active part in providing opportunities for women in ministry because she remembers the obstacles that she has faced over the years. She has launched a search for women who believe that they are called to the ministry to empower them to answer the call and to provide them with tools and information to pursue the ministry. By doing this, Josephine is transforming the political process and pathway to leadership for women who might otherwise have their activities restricted by church politics and religious ideology. Josephine calls this the search for the "Unstoppable Woman" as she explains the purpose behind the idea:

I believe that the main reason for the Unstoppable Woman would be because I was tempted to stop...when the pressure came from my family, from my friends, from my relatives, and from acquaintances. You know, just people "on the bus" that didn't know you. Because of that and because there are women who have stopped, or will stop, if someone doesn't tell them that it's already been paved--a way for you to do it. You have to do it. Don't let something stop you. I think that's my greatest thirst. There are women, and I can use one in particular, she is doing marvelous now among all my daughters or my sons in the ministry. But, she said nobody ever told me I could do it! People told me they would help me do it. But not in the sense of help that comes alongside to provide guidance and wisdom. But the kind of help where people tell you to call when you plan it...before you plan it come to me. Well, that's stopping you from doing what is innately in you. There is something in every woman that is in you to do the call.

Josephine continues explaining the reason for searching for the unstoppable woman by doing as Tabitha and Renee do, which is to lay out the case for women in ministry:

There is no gender difference. I have a picture that showed that when God made Adam and Eve, he just took the rib out, oh, Jesus! But as he took the rib, woman was formed and connected right with man, so there is no division. We've made the division and because of that women stop and take scriptures from the Apostle Paul. But they never researched who, what, when, where, why. What was going on? Paul was not saying women should not teach. He was talking to the women who were out of line to go home and talk to your husband. Well, because we don't do research, we stifled a lot of women. I read a book, *Paul, Women, and Wives*. The greatest thing that I saw in it was that everything that can be said. Everything that is said in this room, when the day is over and we stand before the Master. Those that stopped women are going to have to answer for standing in their way, but not just answer for standing in their way, but stopping them from reaching the people that was assigned to them. *Ad infinitum*. They don't just have to answer for stopping me, but also for the people he called me to, and to the people they were called to. So, I would rather obey God than man, and I think that is my thrust ... to keep women going, to tell them don't stop.

Josephine passionately defends and argues for women the right of women to enter into the ministry. Her words and actions are a demonstration of the collective ability of

African American clergywomen in nondenominational settings to work toward the common goal of empowering, and training women who believe they are called. What Josephine, and other clergywomen in the *Critical* category, is doing is transformative in the sense that she is literally carving out new pathways for women to become ministers without the oversight and the obstacles that are sometimes present in denominational church settings. At the end of her interview she concludes with a very powerful statement that reveals a very clear objective to transform the process of becoming a minister for women:

If there is one thing that I would want people to say about me at the end of my term here on earth... I would not want it to be a priority on the list that I preached good or that I was faithful. Instead, what I would want on my epithet to be “She stood the test.” That I stood for what I believed so that others could walk in it. That would be my greatest thing that I would want to be said; not that I was great at preaching, because I can. But that I took a stand for the ministry and for women...and I stood the test.

Many of the *Critical* clergywomen in this study are involved in collective action to transform the social and political process of becoming a minister. However, their reason for doing so is that they believe there are still women who do not have access to advance into structural positions of ministry and for women who have not “seen” other women in ministry. Destiny shared that one of her greatest disappointments with the church is that she has never been formally trained and that she has been unsuccessful in finding a female minister to mentor her. Because of the gendered challenges that she has faced as a woman in ministry, Destiny joins the legacy of struggle:

It's been a challenge. Sometimes you just kind of want to stay in the arena where you are accepted, but then when you get that call to go into those territories, where there is still some resistance, you still having to stand and deliver that word, with what we call today, that holy ghost boldness. Those have been those experiences. Just

like we have not overcome yet, and we don't need to get relaxed. We need to take the opportunity that has been afforded to us. Keep our foot in the door, so that it's not closed, but don't think it's all the way open, until we take them off the hinges.

In summary, African American women in nondenominational churches still face opposition to their presence in the ministry that black female preachers faced at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, not all of the clergywomen in the study reported experiencing gendered challenges. Further, not all of the clergywomen that experienced gendered challenges interpreted the experiences the same way. Consequently, how each clergywoman responded to their challenges varied between the *Unaffected*, the *Aware*, and the *Critical* categories.

Clergywomen Dawn, Deniece, and Sarah in the *Unaffected* category reported that they experienced challenges that were spiritual in nature. Even though other women in the study report that they still experience gendered challenges, these women remain unaffected by the sexism and patriarchy that still exists, even in nondenominational church settings. There are two primary reasons why they appear to be immune from gendered challenges.

First, Collins (1991) posits that there is a connection between experience and consciousness. The more experience that clergywomen have with oppression in their role as leaders, the more they become aware of its presence. Likewise, Dawn, Deniece, and Sarah's social location within the hierarchy of the church as lay leaders and not as ordained pastors decreases the likelihood that they would have to compete with men for the same power, positions, and privileges in the ministry. Consequently, Vanessa the only ordained pastor in the *Unaffected* category, reported experiencing gendered challenges.

Second, while each woman has a self-defined standpoint concerning themselves and their roles as religious leaders, they all possess different perspectives that they use to interpret their experiences. For instance, while Sarah says that letting men lead is a challenge, the fact that she embraces the ideology of a natural Godly order between men and women leads her to conclude that she cannot change her circumstance.

Clergywomen in the *Aware* category LaShawn, Jackie, Barbara, and Sherease all reported experiencing gendered challenges. All four of the women are “aware” of gender oppression within the church however, they do not feel the need to advocate for themselves as ministers. They believe that God has and will take care of them and direct their lives as ministers. They have a self-defined standpoint and positive self-esteem based in their faith in God.

Again, the perspective that each clergywoman has helps her to interpret her experiences. Jackie and Sherease also believe that man is the head of the woman (and the church), yet they believed that God calls women to work in the ministry. This may help explain why women in this category do not feel the need to advocate themselves or other women in ministry because doing so would put them in direct conflict with God’s order. Another explanation relates to their social location, namely marital status. Two of the women in this category are co-pastors and work alongside their husbands. The male presence of their husbands may act as a buffer to minimize the need for them to advocate for themselves.

Regardless of their perspectives on gender roles and the opposition that they face, their self-definition enables them to reject the dominant ideology used to exclude women from structural positions of power in the church (Collins 1991). They use power-to or

self-empowerment to negotiate power and function in their roles, despite the opposition that they face. This suggests that while the level of cultural context is where the dominant group is able to insert their ideology it is also the level where subordinate groups resist oppression (Collins 1991).

All twelve of the *Critical* clergywomen experienced gendered challenges. However, unlike women in the *Aware* and *Unaffected* category, they are more critical of the patriarchal church structure because they are more exposed to gender oppression due to their social location. As such, social factors such as education, and ordination status in combination with marital status provide the context in which the *Critical* clergywomen have developed a unique perspective based on their experiences.

First, their level of education has shaped their beliefs about gender roles beyond the traditional views held by Protestant churches. During the interview, Yvonne acknowledged that her education and knowledge of the women's movement provided her with a different perspective on gender relations. Kathy referenced the idea that an educated person understands how context matters in interpreting Biblical text. Finally, Erica says that chaplaincy training transformed her way of thinking.

Secondly, many of the *Critical* clergywomen are either single, widowed, or divorced except for Althea, Claire, and Renee. The absence of a constant male presence in their lives to validate their call requires that they be capable of defending their position as ministers. Clergywomen in the *Unaffected* and *Aware* categories were either married co-pastors or single lay leaders. Conversely, women in the *Critical* category more often work as ordained ministers without spouses or as married senior pastors of their own churches, which puts them in direct competition with their male counterparts. Therefore,

clergywomen in the *Critical* category more often directly confront those who question their authority.

*Critical* clergywomen are not only outspoken, they are able to name their oppression (Collins 1991). This process is transformative and revolutionary for clergywomen who must stand alone and validate their positions at the highest levels of structural power. As a result, they are not only self-empowered, but they use power-with, which is the kind of power that utilizes collective action and collaboration to achieve common goals and effect social and political change.

*Critical* clergywomen collaborate with other clergywomen in one of two ways. First, women ministers choose to attend churches led by female pastors so that someone familiar with their struggles can mentor them. Yvonne, Erica, Kathy, and Destiny all have female pastors and/or mentors. Secondly, experienced clergywomen find new ways to inspire, train, and mentor other potential female ministers. Kathy, Claire, Audrey, Josephine, Pauline, Althea, Renee, and Erica all have elements in their ministry work that include mentoring other women.

## BECOMING A MINISTER

Ordination endows ministers with the full rights and authority to administer religious sacraments, interpret the scriptures, perform various rites and rituals, and to oversee congregations. Becoming a minister is a process that varies between Protestant denominations and usually culminates with ordination (Chaves 1997; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Nesbitt 1997). There is even more variation on the status of ordaining women within denominations depending on denominational structure, race, and geographical location (Chaves 1997; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Nesbitt 1997). The rise

of nondenominational churches and the absence of an organizing structure to oversee the ordination process further decentralize the pathway to ordination. This can be both liberating for women entering the ministry and constraining.

The process of becoming a minister can be described as the process of ongoing commitment. Sociologically, *commitment* refers to the acquisition of a healthy sense of self-identity through intense engagement with the everyday life world (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). The term commitment is generally used to describe the activities and characteristics of certain groups and people and has uses in analysis of religion, organizations, and deviant groups (Becker 1960; Harrison 1974). Harrison (1974) described the process of becoming committed to a religious cause as reprioritizing personal obligations and options and involving a paradigmatic shift on worldviews. In other words, becoming a minister requires a change in lifestyle, action, and thought.

The pathway to ordination and leadership for participants in this study reflects the variation inherent of how, who, and when Protestant churches ordain ministers and the process of becoming committed. As such, participants describe similar experiences pertaining to the personal journey of *becoming* a minister. The journey of *becoming* a minister for women in this study follows five primary stages: 1) hearing the call 2) answering the call 3) doing the call 4) identifying with the call and 5) continuing the call.

### *Hearing the Call*

The first stage of becoming a minister involves what participants describe as hearing the call. The call is a strong internal urge to a religious vocation, which some ministers describe as one that is not chosen, but divinely inspired (Nesbitt 1997; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). All three categories of speakers, the *Unaffected*,

the *Aware*, and the *Critical*, remember a time or period in their lives when they became internally aware of the call. The personal awareness of the call is accompanied by non-empirical occurrences such as visions, dreams, and voices. In addition, the initial awareness of the call is often coupled with a sense of being different or set apart. Destiny says that her awareness of the call came as an audible voice that she understood as God speaking:

Definitely it was a calling. It was an audible voice that I heard God called me and said that “I need you to preach my word. I have women and people that are depending on you to walk out this calling.” It was definitely not a choice, but a calling that fell on me. I would have been in the church and working in many capacities. It didn't necessarily have to be in the pulpit, but that's the call that God has given me.

Destiny says that it was not her desire to preach, but that it was a divine unction given to her by God. Dawn says that she felt God urging her to leave her home in Southeast Texas and go to a Bible training school in Oklahoma where she learned to hear God's voice; “I went and I just developed such a strong relationship with the Lord where I could really hear his voice.” Jackie says that she heard God calling her to the ministry one Sunday while in church; “I never will forget it. We were in our old church then, God was telling me, it's time that you get up and go proclaim what I have called you to do.” All three women from each category of speaker shared similar experiences when describing how they became aware of the call.

### *Answering the Call*

The second stage of becoming a minister after hearing the call is answering the call. After participants became aware of the call, they often hesitated to acknowledge or answer the call. Answering the call is vocalizing the acknowledgement of the call to

family, friends, and one's church and spiritual leaders. At this point in the process, the call becomes like a dance where God initiates the steps with a partner (the minister) and the two go back and forth between hearing and accepting, denying and doubt, answering and ignoring. Some of the women hesitated verbalizing the call because they were unsure if this is what God desired of them. Some hesitated because they realized that the religious vocation was a difficult career choice, while others hesitated because they realized that being a woman in ministry was not accepted in most Protestant denominations.

Vanessa says that she had a strong desire to teach people the word of God, which she did in her home for a period. However, when her pastor suggested that she become ordained she hesitated and asked why. It was only after her pastor explained that ordination was necessary only to validate her call to others that she agreed to undergo the ordination process. Vanessa says that she wanted to make sure that ordination did not tie her down or obligate her to a denomination that would prohibit her freedom to what she believed God wanted.

Sherease recalls awareness of the call during a vision one Sunday while attending a Baptist church. She immediately recoiled at the thought and told God no. "I was like, God, I don't need that. I'll do whatever you ask me to do, but don't put me in a position where now I've got to establish a title or an office. I don't want that bother." She hesitated answering the call because she had watched women struggle for acceptance as ministers during that time in Baptist settings. However, she still decided to vocalize her call by telling her pastor.

After participants accept and verbalize the call then they are met with a combination of acceptance and validation or rejection from pastors, family, and friends. This process may repeat itself each time participants feel that God is adding another dimension to their call or when undertaking new tasks in the ministry. Hence, the commitment process begins with assuming a new status and continues well after assuming the new status (Harrison 1974).

### *Doing the Call*

Part of answering a vocational call to the ministry requires a combination of formal and informal training depending on the church and organizing body. I define formal training as attending seminary and theological schools or through local and national associations that provide uniform training and ordination. Informal training is more like an apprenticeship where candidates serve in local churches through preaching, teaching, leading, and worship while working toward ordination.

Kathy initially acknowledged her call at a local church where she had been teaching Bible classes for some time. However, it was not until sometime later that she enrolled in a minister-in-training program. Audrey went to a Theological school in north Texas to receive training until she realized that there were separate ministry tracks for men and women. She later decided to attend a Bible college to continue her training. LaShawn started doing the call at the early age of fifteen. All her training has been informal and she taught and preached in several denominational setting before becoming an ordained minister in 1998 and then assuming the role of a co-pastor in 2013.

Erica has gone through a variety of formal and informal training. She initially started training informally at several local churches where she would teach and preach,

moving from being a licensed minister to eventually becoming an ordained pastor. She then went through chaplaincy training which has been her vocation for the last few years. Doing the call helps to provide experience for the clergywomen as they gain confidence in their roles as ministers. This experience helps to further validate their call.

### *Identifying with the Call*

As the clergywomen gain experience in their roles as ministers, their worldview becomes transformed as well as their self-identity. They go beyond being a religious churchgoer and assume a ministerial status as a minister. Working in the vocation offers the necessary confidence and validation for their call and provides a sense of self-empowerment. Any previous doubts about the calling diminish with each passing year. Additionally, identifying with the call affects their relationships with family. Many of the clergywomen report that when they initially verbalized their calling, that families objected to the idea.

Pauline says that her in-laws would write harassing letters to her expressing their disapproval of her role as a pastor. Vanessa expresses that her relationship with some of her children became strained when she assumed the role of a minister. Jackie remembers that she was initially afraid to tell her parents because she thought they would object to her being a female minister. However, over time clergywomen like Yvonne and Jackie report that their families now respect them and even call on them for pastoral prayer and counseling. Vanessa reports that she has a daughter who has a flourishing music ministry. As the process of commitment continues, the clergywomen continue to transition as their roles as minister take them in various pathways.

### *Continuing the Call*

As the dance continues, the clergywomen continue to have visions and dreams concerning their future plans as ministers. Most of them say that they see themselves on “bigger platforms” and having more opportunities to exercise their call:

Oh gosh well, I'll tell you that God gave me a vision. I know that there are platforms that I'm going to be on. God has shown it to me. (Jackie)

The spirit of God that lives within me confirms that I have had some experiences that people should know about and that there some things that God is still going to do with those experiences that will help people along the way. So, whatever platform that may be is going to be broader than me and my Bible and my study, apparently. (Yvonne)

I see myself the way God sees me now. I know that He has a special calling on my life. He has called me to do some great things in my community, in my family, and I believe that it's not just local but it's national, only because He says so. (Althea)

As Harrison (1974) suggests, the process of becoming committed is a never-ending process that continues long after the individual assumes a new status. Becoming a minister in nondenominational churches offers African American women more freedom to define their roles as ministers and chart out their own courses than denominational churches provide. However, as Destiny can attest, having no governing body or predetermined opportunities for training she says that her greatest disappointment is the lack of mentorship in accepting her call.

In summary, the process of becoming a minister in nondenominational churches varies greatly with each clergywoman. Each denomination has different requirements for ordaining ministers and different policies concerning the ordination of women (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Zikmund et al. 1998). Historically, the Black Church has comprised

of a large female membership with a majority male leadership. Data shows that black women maintain a high level of attendance and commitment to the church. Nevertheless, their numbers as leaders remain relatively low in comparison (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). However, this study reveals that the rise of nondenominational churches opens up a new possibility for African American women to establish and lead their own congregations, as well as create spaces for other women as well.

However, examining their stories through the lens of commitment offers a universal experience that describes how they become ministers. The five stages of becoming a minister for African American women in nondenominational ministries is not a linear process. It is more like a dance where they go back and forth as they transition into their new status. The role of being a minister affects their view of themselves and their personal relationships. It is a gradual process that happens throughout their life-course and shapes their worldview.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study focuses on the experiences of African American women in nondenominational churches. This research also examines their perceptions of the social and political process of becoming a religious leader as well as how they negotiate power with their male counterparts. In-depth interviews provided rich data and advances sociological knowledge concerning how clergywomen negotiate power and fight against gender oppression within nondenominational churches. The most noteworthy contribution of this study reveals that despite the fact that clergywomen in nondenominational churches still encounter religious sexism, they have been successful in establishing their own churches and breaking gender barriers within the church. Thus, nondenominational ministries are either a potential site for a paradigm shift toward empowerment to end sexism for African American women in ministry (and potentially black women as a whole), or a site to perpetuate patriarchal oppression.

Other major findings stem from five research questions posed in this study. First, interviews revealed that African American women choose nondenominational churches because they are searching for a worship experience with more opportunities to learn, more freedom, and more opportunities to pursue the ministry, which is similar to the findings in Thumma's (2010) study of nondenominational churches. Moreover, their exodus from denominational churches follows a pattern of black female preachers and activists who sought alternatives to their current churches when the spiritual climate or political structure of the church did not suite them.

Not only are they leaving behind denominational traditions and practices in their former churches, they are establishing their own churches and engaging in their own ministry endeavors. This implies that black religious women are not passive victims of their circumstances but instead they are active agents exercising their right to choose how they worship and serve. Seventeen of the twenty women interviewed in this study previously attended a historically black church, which indicates that black women may not be willing to remain in denominations that do not incorporate contemporary worship elements and/or support women in ministry.

Additionally, the findings in this study advance the knowledge of nondenominational churches because it supports findings from previous research conducted by Scott Thumma (2010) at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Clergywomen in this study report similar reasons for leaving denominational churches and describe similar worship experiences reported by nondenominational churchgoers in Thumma's (2010) study. Clergywomen in this study and churchgoers in Thumma's study report having more freedom in how to dress in church, livelier worship services, and being free from denominational doctrine. Consequently, this study provides key insight into the denominational exodus within the context of black female clergy.

Another finding from the study reveals that black clergywomen still experience oppression at the intersection of race, class, and gender. While nondenominational churches may provide new religious spaces where women can carve out new opportunities and experiences, male pastors and churchgoers across all Protestant churches retain sexist ideologies concerning women in ministry. However, the social

location of each woman factored into whether or not participants experienced gendered challenges as well as how they interpreted and responded to the opposition.

Namely, ordained clergywomen experienced more opposition than did women who were lay leaders (non-ordained minister such as worship leaders, youth workers, etc.). This is because ordination provides more access to privileges, power, and authority within the church. Thus, ordained clergywomen directly compete with their male counterparts for status and power. Women without this status, regardless of their level of service and commitment to the ministry, pose less of a threat.

Many of the ordained clergywomen experienced gendered challenges, which shaped their experiences and caused them to become either more aware and/or critical of the patriarchal and sexist church structure. Collins (1991) notes the reciprocal relationship between experience and consciousness. The higher the position the women held in ministry, the more they experienced sexism. The more they experienced sexism, the more they developed a critical consciousness. Hence, critical consciousness leads to a self-defined standpoint, which makes resistance possible.

Another social location that determined whether they experienced gendered challenges and how they interpreted them was marital status. Moreover, marital status often combined with ordination status to create various experiences and perspectives for each woman. Married women who co-pastored a church with their husbands had a different perspective about the challenges that they faced than did single and divorced women who worked in the ministry alone.

Race and class mattered for some of the clergywomen. A few of the women perceived that they received fewer opportunities for advancement and had less access to

resources than their white female and black male counterparts. While both white and black clergywomen experience religious sexism, black clergywomen in this study note a “uniquely universal” experience. Their uniquely universal experiences suggest that black clergywomen experience oppression within the matrix of domination where race, class, gender, and religion combine in a way that is still different from their white counterparts (Collins 1991). This finding is consistent with studies that have shown churches with female pastors have smaller congregations and fewer resources. In addition, because many of the clergywomen in this study previously attended a historically black church, their experiences are consistent with previous research, which reveals that historically black denominations are less likely to have a female senior pastor (Konieczny and Chaves 2000).

Black feminist theory has examined how race, class, and gender intersect and operate in the lives of religious women. Yet this theory does not go in-depth to examine the nuanced experiences of clergywomen. Womanist theory/theology does use an intersectional approach to understand the experiences and activities of religious women. Womanist theology critiques the sexist practices of historically black churches (Williams 1987).

However, neither black feminists nor womanists have addressed black female clergy in nondenominational spaces. Findings in this study reveal that the clergywomen’s spirituality and religiosity allow them to transcend any race, class, gender, and religious oppression that they experience throughout their life course. Therefore, this research advances both theories by examining how race, class, gender, and religion intersect in the

lives of these women on the *individual level of biography* and the *level of cultural context* (Collins 1991).

Next, the process of becoming a minister in nondenominational churches is even more fragmented and varied than in denominational churches. At this point, nondenominational churches are not organized around any central governing body, which means that for now, these churches can establish their own policies for ordaining women. The social and political process to becoming a minister is divided along two major pathways. Clergywomen follow either formal pathways to ordination, such as seminary and Bible schools, or informal pathways through apprentice-like involvement in their local church.

Despite the lack of a universal process for entering the vocation, the process of becoming a minister involves five stages: hearing the call, answering the call, doing the call, identifying with the call, and continuing the call. The process of becoming committed to the call is a non-linear track that changes overtime with their experiences and transforms their worldview (Harrison 1974). For most of the ordained clergywomen in this study, the nondenominational pathway presented fewer obstacles to senior leadership opportunities in their perspective churches. In fact, more than half of the clergywomen in the study have obtained ordination status.

The third research question and finding reveal how nondenominational clergywomen perceive themselves and how their perceptions affect their roles as ministers. Collins (1991) argues that black women form a self-definition based on experiences. Through their experiences as ministers, clergywomen have developed a master status/identity (Hughes 1945) as a minister that goes beyond a profession, but is more a way of life and

a way of seeing the world. Moreover, clergywomen in this study have a positive self-esteem and see themselves as God's representatives on earth. They describe themselves as messengers and light bearers and believe that God empowers them to function in their roles as ministers. Equally important, clergywomen in this study have a positive self-esteem despite experiencing gendered challenges due to their *outsider within* perspective. This perspective allows them to make sense of the dichotomous nature of serving as God's representative, yet not being recognized for their contributions to the churches and communities they serve.

The level of cultural context is where both domination and resistance becomes salient within religious communities (Collins 1991). As such, African American religious communities and societal gender roles shape the lives of black women as a group. The Black Church has promoted and supported the education and activism of black women and thus has fostered their spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development. Yet, it has also promoted patriarchy and denied women access to structural positions of leadership. Despite the dialectical relationship that exists between black clergywomen and the church, they have maintained a positive self-esteem in large part to an *outsider within* perspective (Collins 1991).

As previously stated, the most notable contribution of this study reveals that clergywomen in this study have been successful in establishing their own churches and breaking gender barriers within the church. Thirteen of the twenty clergywomen in this study are ordained, eight of them have established their own churches, and three of them have established their own churches as co-pastors with their spouses. One ordained clergywoman has her own prayer line and she operates as an evangelist. While these

findings are not generalizable, in-depth interviews provide insight into the complex pathways and political processes of becoming a minister within the fledgling nondenominational movement.

The success of nondenominational clergywomen in this study indicates a potential paradigm shift toward empowerment to end sexism for African American women in religious leadership roles for three key reasons. First, because nondenominational church structures lack a central organizing body, African American women have been able to operate with a greater level of autonomy and seek out churches that would support their beliefs and ministry efforts. Second, women are redefining what it means to be a religious leader using their self-defined standpoint as messengers of social justice and light. They have a feminist/womanist approach to ministry that allows them to be more connected to their communities and take their roles beyond their church onto their secular jobs, and into other vocations such as the chaplaincy. Redefining the role of minister from one that is male and career centered, to one that is non-gendered and multi-faceted, may be essential in validating women who serve in roles as religious leaders without pay and recognition due to religious sexism. Third, if women continue to enter the ministry via nondenominational avenues, then the likelihood exists that a female pastoral succession will create a more visible and stable pathway for other women seeking to enter the vocation.

Finally, the last finding stems from the question concerning how African American clergywomen use and perceive power within the male-dominated church structure. The data emerged from the interviews revealed that the social location of each clergywoman provided her different experiences and perspectives concerning her identity and her roles.

Additionally, each woman had her own consciousness, or level of awareness, concerning the patriarchal structures of Protestant churches, which she used to interpret her experiences. Therefore, I was able to create a typology of speakers based on how they talked about their experiences and whether or not they faced gendered challenges. Of the three categories of speakers the *Critical* category reported the most gendered challenges, but more importantly, they were more critical of the patriarchy within the church. Subsequently, *Critical* clergywomen not only used power-to (self-empowerment) to resist religious sexism, but they used power-with (collaboration, collective action, solidarity) to mentor other women desiring to enter the ministry. They also were eager and willing to educate anyone who challenged their positions and authority rather than using deference or ignoring challenges altogether.

Although I had an insider status as a black clergywoman and I could relate to many of their stories, there were times when I found myself as an outsider. At the onset of the research, I acknowledged my personal bias in that I identify as a black feminist/womanist but realized that not all women would share my views. This fact became more salient when I interviewed women who had more of an essentialist view of gender roles of men and women and who maintained traditional values that govern the activities of women in the church. In these instances, I found myself as an outsider.

However, I was able to learn from the women in *Unaffected* and *Aware* categories who espoused to these traditional views. While they had a perspective different from my own concerning their roles as clergywomen and different experiences with religious sexism, I learned that power is not dichotomous, but dynamic and complex. The kind of power that is used is determined by those who wield it (Allen 1998). Each woman wields

a different kind of power whether power-to or power-with in order to function in their roles and resist religious sexism.

The study was limited due to the small sample of majority women living in Texas, at this point in time. As such, future research is needed to determine whether the nondenominational church movement will truly become a paradigm shift toward empowerment to end sexism and a transformative space for gender relations. It is possible that as the movement grows, it will become more organized and hierarchal in nature with a central organizing body at which point it can no longer be called “non” denominational. If that happens then time will only tell if women will continue to establish and maintain their own autonomous churches.

This study raises questions for further investigation. A broader survey study could examine whether nondenominational churches have more female pastors than traditional denominational churches. Participant demographics in this study point to a number of variables to be explored in quantitative research such as age, level of education and seminary training, marital status, geographical location, position/title in the church, and length of years in church attendance. Additionally, other variables to investigate include congregation size, and biblical interpretation of clergywomen. Also, the study could be extended to include the perspective of congregants who choose to attend churches led by female pastors and their reasons why. Furthermore, more research is needed on the attitudes and perspectives of the husbands and significant others of African American clergywomen.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



**Institutional Review Board Application**  
**Certificate of Approval**

Applicant: Jonafa Banbury

Application Number : 2013N3005

Project Title: A Qualitative Study of African-American Women in Non-Denominational Ministry

Date of Approval: 07/02/13 23:36:25

Expiration Date: 07/02/14

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Blonds".

Assistant Vice President for Research  
and Federal Relations

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon Lane".

Chair, Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

### Consent Form

The Texas State IRB approved this project 2013N3005 on 07/02/13. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 [bnorthcut@txstate.edu](mailto:bnorthcut@txstate.edu)).

You are invited to participate in a study of African-American women in non-denominational ministry. My name is Jonafa Banbury, the principal investigator of this study, and graduate student at Texas State University-San Marcos in the Department of Sociology. This research project is a non-funded study, which will be used for my Master's thesis. I might have the opportunity to present the findings from this study at an academic conference, in graduate school (PhD) applications, or in a professional journal article. My contact information is 512-245-4769 or [jhb@txstate.edu](mailto:jhb@txstate.edu).

This research project seeks an understanding of the issues of African-American women in Christian non-denominational church and ministry leadership positions. This study focuses on the experiences of women in ministry and how they interact with other members of the church. As an African-American woman in ministry, you have been chosen as a possible participant in this study because of your work and/or volunteer service in a Christian non-denominational church or non-profit ministry. Participating in this study means that you are interested in discussing with me your experiences related to this work. You will be one of approximately twenty African-American women chosen to participate in this study.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in a one-on-one, in-depth interview with me. I will ask you questions about your experiences as a woman in a ministry leadership position, for example: do you consider yourself a leader; have you always been in a non-denominational church; or can you recall a time when you felt opposition to your work, did not feel welcomed, or was treated differently because you were a woman leader. My goal in this study is to produce a thesis, and to hopefully share my findings through a conference paper and published journal article.

The interview will be digital-audio-recorded and should take no more than one hour of your time. The possible although unlikely risk to your participation is psychological harm from describing past events that may have been or are currently stressful or overwhelming. Resources that might be helpful to you after this interview include the International Alliance of Women Ministers (IAWM) ([www.womenministers.org](http://www.womenministers.org)), the

National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) (<http://www.ncnw.org/>), and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) (<http://www.nacwc.org/>).

Additionally, a list of mental health providers is attached to this consent form should you need counseling after this interview. Note that any costs of counseling, legal aid, or other services are the study participants' responsibility.

The potential benefit of participating is sharing experiences, achievements, and frustrations with an attentive listener. By accessing another medium (academia), this study provides potential benefits to the participants by allowing them to verbalize their experiences. In terms of potential benefits to society, the findings in this research would hopefully contribute to the overall knowledge of women in ministry, and the intersection of race, class, and gender in religious organizations. No monetary or other compensation will be provided to the research participants. This research project presents no more than minimal risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain strictly confidential. Recorded interviews and transcripts of recordings will be assigned a code number so your name will never be attached to the recordings. Only I, the interviewer, will hear recorded interviews, and they will be kept in a locked file cabinet at all times. I will keep the recordings and transcripts for two years, only so that I may analyze the interview data. I, the principal investigator, will transcribe and code the interview data. I will then analyze and organize the data into a typology--or model--of the different kinds of experiences of becoming a minister. When I describe the information obtained, an alias or false name will be used in place of your true name or identity and the name of your meeting location.

If you decide to take part in the interview, your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to your standing with the University and any organization/entity with which you are associated. You are free to stop the interview at any time, and you may choose not to answer any question(s) for any reason. I can send you a summary of the study or any resulting papers if you like. The Texas State University Institutional Review Board has approved this study (case# 2013N3005). You will be offered a copy of this form to keep. If you have questions in the future, please contact myself, Jonafa Banbury the principal investigator, via email at [jhb@txstate.edu](mailto:jhb@txstate.edu) or by phone at 512-245-4769.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature means that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw from this study at any time after signing this form should you chose to do so.

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **I. Demographic Questions**

1. Tell me a little about yourself (marital status, education, age, children, and where you are from, other occupation, etc.).

### **II. Religious Affiliation and Ministry Questions**

2. When did you start going to church? Where? What denomination?
3. Why have you chosen a non-denominational church, or why do you serve in a non-profit ministry?

### **III. Church/Ministry Leadership and Volunteer Experiences**

4. How and why did you become a minister (pastor, music minister, women's minister, etc.)?
5. Is ministry your vocation or do you work a secular job as well? What do you do in your church/ministry?
6. What does being a minister mean to you, your identity?
7. How has your relationship with God (and family) changed over the years?

### **IV. Gender Roles and Leadership Issues**

8. What is it like to be an African-American woman in ministry?
9. How do you balance ministry, work, and family?
10. What is it like working under male or female pastors? Is there a difference between working with men or women leaders?
11. What have been your greatest challenges/obstacles as an African American woman in ministry How have you dealt with them?
12. In regards to church and church leadership, how do you define power?

**V. Future Concerns and Concluding Questions**

13. In terms of your service in ministry, where do you see yourself in the future?

14. Do you know of any other African-American women serving in non-denominational ministries who would like to participate in this study?

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